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OCTOBER 2004

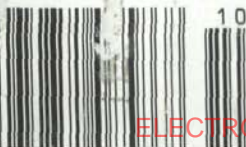
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He needed something
on his accuser...

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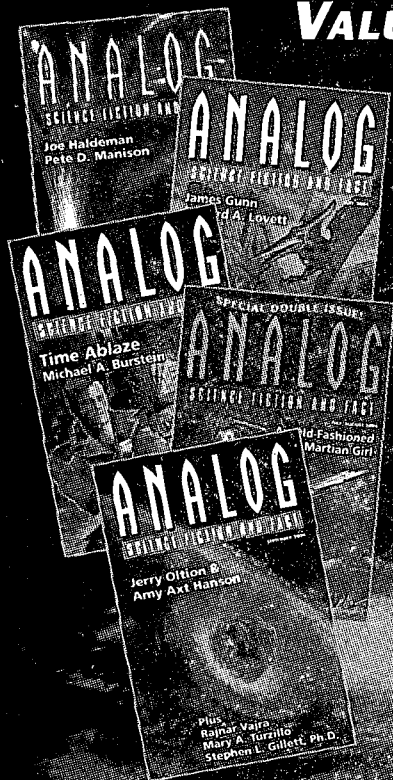
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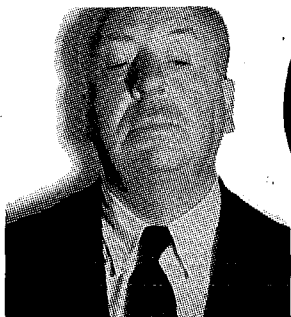
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October 2004

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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

TWISTS AND TURNS

This month we bring you a selection of stories shaped by quick reversals, complex characters, and surprising revelations. In "Bleeding Hearts," L. A. Wilson's Waymon Hayes finds himself in a case as confusing as a house of mirrors. Robert Gray's "Kapitan's Late Shift" compellingly tracks the shifting emotional and moral ground of a convenience store manager. Marcy Murdock, Sharon Mackey's P.I. in "Dress for Snow," looks for a murderer, and a motive, in the homes visited by a dead house painter. Cyrus Auburn, John H. Dirckx's popular detective sergeant, discovers something fishy about a murder victim at a run-down roadside motel. And Steve Hockensmith deftly combines convolutions with comedy in "The Case of the Unfortunate Fortune Cookie"—a story within a story within a story.

Many of you may remember Robert Lopresti's short but twisty tale "Nailbiter" in these pages (September 2003). We are pleased to report that the story has received its just reward—a Derringer for best short-short mystery story. (Congratulations, Rob!) Created in 1997, the Derringer Awards are presented by the Short Mystery Fiction Society (SMFS), an organization that serves to promote and support the mystery short story. SMFS also produces a "netletter" and hosts an online discussion group. For more information about this terrific group—and for a complete list of Derringer Award winners and nominees—go to their Web site at www.thewindjammer.com/smfs.

We're also thrilled to have a new story from Alan Gordon that recounts an episode from the life of Theophilos, a jester and member of the Fools' Guild in medieval Constantinople. Following the story, we have a "Conversation" with the author about his witty historical series, now in its fifth outing with *An Antic Disposition*, which, like the first book in the series, picks up where Shakespeare left off—this time in the Danish city of Slesvig.

Our collection of crime stories this month is sure to please the most discerning readers!

DRESS FOR SNOW

SHARON J. MACKEY

Snowflakes spun across my windshield like tiny fairies with no sense of direction. The speedometer hovered around fifteen, since twenty felt a little too risky.

I pried my fingers from around the steering wheel and, with one hand, snapped Jeb's leather bomber jacket across my chin. The truck's heater had not made a dent in the twenty-four degrees my landlady Prudence Geasley had so fervently reported that morning. I'd been sipping a hot tea when she'd rapped on the door of the service porch and made a show of unrolling the *Deerfoot Gazette* she'd retrieved from the front steps of the Victorian. I scanned the front page . . . KENTUCKY LEGISLATURE RECOMMENDS BUDGET, and below that, FIRST FREEZE OF SEASON SERVES UP SIX INCHES OF SNOW.

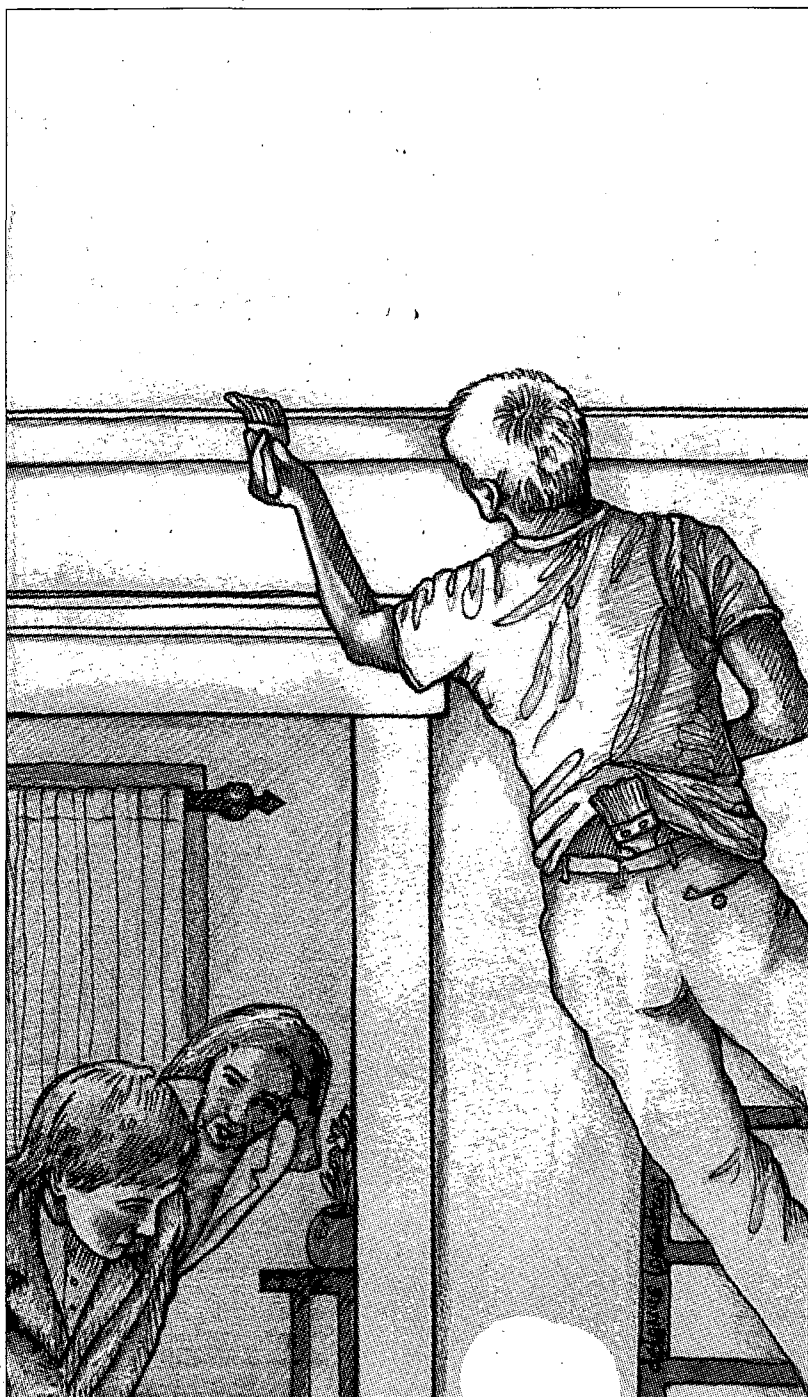
She'd stood anchored there in her decades-old yellow galoshes broadcasting the temperature and the *Gazette's* prediction that the freeze would be around for awhile. She'd then tossed me the paper and told me to read it for myself. She had blueberry muffins in the oven and couldn't be everybody's weather girl.

I had desperately wanted one of Prudie's muffins.

But the call came not long after she traipsed away toward home and hearth, leaving me with nothing but a wishful thought.

Naturally, I was the only traveler on Flatwoods Road at nine o'clock on Saturday morning. I'll admit the scenery was agreeable—fields covered with an expanse of white and powder-coated evergreens that made the foothills of the Cumberland Plateau look like a wonderland, a wonderland I would rather have experienced from my rented upstairs window seat, my fingers curled around a hot cup of tea.

But the sheriff had been insistent and I figured he needed my old four-wheel drive. He'd said his head deputy, Junior Henderson, had taken some girl in the unit Suburban to Lexington the night before and hadn't come in yet. I pitied the girl for a half second, then reminded him I was not on the county payroll and suggested



he call Bobby Ed Flathers or Whitey Spurlock, who were not on the payroll either but both had trucks, new ones, not like the junker my late husband had so rudely left, with an empty tank, in our garage.

And then he said it wasn't the truck he needed, that he needed me. My opinion. My informed judgment. I believe I heard him use the word *expertise*. I can't quite remember, I was so stunned by the informed judgment part. He said he'd encountered a situation that required my speculation. He'd said it amicably, like I wasn't the only private investigator providing the population of Deerfoot, Kentucky, with an upside to his mediocre yet sincere law enforcement potential.

Like I wasn't a woman.

And now that I think about it, like I was.

I slowed down when I saw the sheriff's squad car through the flurries. I pulled in behind it, parked on the side of the road at the top of a shallow, tire-rutted ravine. I knew the ravine well. The wooded path beyond it led to the banks of Flatwoods Creek, which in summer was a prime spot for walks and fishing and, as my high school algebra students would say, "romancing it."

Now the path was snow covered and its entry into the trees seemed to repel, telling me to back off.

But I could hardly listen to my instincts.

The sheriff had said he needed me to drive the pickup down into the woods almost to the edge of the creek, that he would be waiting for me about twenty yards to the left of a tree he'd marked with yellow tape.

I gripped the steering wheel and started down the bank, the tires hugging whatever roughage lay beneath the snow. I plummeted for an instant, then the brakes took hold at a clearing where the trees above had caught most of the accumulation. I let go of the brakes slowly, hearing the crunch of iced rocks and limbs beneath my tires.

The woods were nothing short of majestic, and I was a reverent intruder. The same thought came to me again, as it did every winter. The one about how a blanket of snow changes everything. And another one, about how Mother Nature can draw you in with beauty and then trap you. I shook that one off.

After a quarter mile the road ended, as I knew it would. On a normal temperate day, one would park there at the end of the path and walk through the woods to the creek to avoid major and costly damages to one's vehicle from charging fenderfirst through unpaved territory. But as I said earlier, I'd already put

my better judgment on hold, and it wasn't a normal day.

Cautiously, I drove for at least another twenty or thirty yards, running over small frozen saplings and squeezing between larger maples and poplars. I felt isolated, although a bit warmer due to some heat finally blowing around in the truck.

I spotted a river birch, one of its trunks wrapped with a scrawny length of yellow plastic, then made a bumpy left turn and piloted the woods as far as I could go until the trees and snow became too thick to maneuver. I cut the truck's engine and braced for cold.

As soon as my boots hit the ground, I saw Don Earl's substantial frame lumbering toward me through a web of white in the distance, a backpack slung across his shoulders.

It was the first time I'd seen him out of uniform. He wore a faded hooded sweatshirt, hood up, under a heavy wool jacket, blue jeans, and hiking boots, and no gloves. Twenty-six degrees and no gloves. I'd almost forgotten. In Deerfoot, real men don't wear gloves.

I shut the door and scooted through the snow, stopping in front of my truck as he approached me, his face unshaven and ruddy, a shock of dark hair falling into his clear gray eyes. "Have any trouble?" he said congenially, and I felt my usual defenses floundering.

"Not really," I lied, trying to head off a useless confrontation. I'd had trouble changing outta my warm flannels and leaving my hot tea on the countertop, not to mention Prudie's hot muffins and the fact that I was hungry. And it was Saturday, my day off from teaching algebra to the juveniles of Deerfoot High. "This better be important," I blurted, pulling my silk-lined split leather gloves up around my wrists.

He stretched an arm out slowly, propping a large bare hand against a tree trunk, and placed the other hand on his hip, watching me while I finished fidgeting with my gloves. I folded my arms and stared back, but it was difficult. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Maybe he was confused or disappointed.

The woods were silent except for the distant sounds of snow dribbling out from high in the treetops.

"What?" I finally said.

He stood up straight, folded his arms, and looked away, into the woods, shuffling his boots in the snow. "I thought we could . . ." He shrugged.

"Could what, Don Earl? I didn't come all the way out here to stand in the snow and—"

"I thought we could get along." He faced me. "I thought we could work together. Cordially. That's all. I'll make sure you get paid for your time."

I was surprised. I'd always thought he considered me a nuisance, nosing around his crime scenes, calling him at odd hours to glean information he was always reluctant to give and usually wouldn't. I tilted my head. "I thought you didn't appreciate me."

"Maybe you've grown on me," he said, in a voice so low I almost didn't hear him. But I did. I heard the vulnerability in his voice and it fazed me. Besides that, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to grow on Don Earl.

At that point, I tried to think of something brilliant to say, or appropriate. I took too long, and he suddenly turned around and began trudging through the snow back into the trees, waving for me to follow. "I got a call early this morning. Some kids were hiking out here pretty early," he said, his voice picking up its usual energy. He looked back at me briefly as he walked. "Remember Nathan Gregory? He does all kinds of painting—"

I held a tree limb away from my eyes and came to a dead stop. "Nate? You mean Nate Gregory?" I felt flushed and cold all at once. Nate was the one I'd always called when I needed some painting done I didn't have time to do myself. It had taken him two weeks to repaint Prudie's Victorian this past summer. I remembered Prudie complaining about his rickety ladder and worn out paintbrushes. I also remembered his deep conversations about life and his convictions. He'd been a deeply religious man, a man who made you think. "Don't tell me, Don Earl. Don't tell me Nate . . ." I began.

Don Earl turned in the snow several yards ahead of me. "He had a drinking problem for a long time and couldn't hold a job but I heard he licked it a few years ago. Now I have my doubts. He lived in those apartments the Baptist church remodeled. Nobody'd seen him around for a while. I phoned the apartments where he rented and they cleaned his stuff out a few weeks ago. Not much. Odds and ends mostly and a few pieces of junk furniture."

I felt my head drop and found myself staring down at my boots planted in the snow. They felt like anvils pulling me down to earth. I closed my eyes momentarily, looked up, lifted my right boot, and managed to keep going, telling myself to focus on the facts. "What kids?" I called, kicking at the powder, trying to keep up with his long stride.

"Coupla teenagers all excited about the first snow. There's a pretty good hill across the creek and they were headed over there with their sleds—they thought this would be a shortcut. They got a little lost, saw Nate's car covered up over there," he pointed to a mound further ahead, "found him, then backtracked and headed

home. I got a call this morning from one of the parents."

I plodded behind Don Earl, but I could feel the sting in my eyes, the wrench in my gut. Prudie would be devastated. By the time Nate had finished painting the Victorian, they'd become buddies, and she'd called on him many times for various paint jobs she'd saved for him. I felt in my jacket pockets for a Kleenex and couldn't find one.

"... there's still some stuff to clear up," Don Earl was saying as I followed his lead through the woods. I pictured Nate, his silver hair and navy bandana, and his long, thin frame. He'd been left-handed and had injured his left arm in the Korean War, so he would grasp the paintbrush with his left hand and move his left wrist up and down with his right arm. Despite his handicap, he did good work. I knew Nate's wife had died long ago. There had been no children, and he'd never remarried.

Don Earl stopped at the foot of a huge tree with sprawling roots where the snow had been cleared in an almost perfect circle. Beside him, an elongated figure lay against the snow wrapped in a moss-colored army blanket. The blanket had been secured with four lengths of rope. A black Adidas bag, zipped up, lay beside the body. It was the bag Nate had carried back and forth each day when he was working for Prudie.

"I didn't have any body bags in the squad," Don Earl said, "just some plastic bags and that blanket. I found his body seated, his back propped up against that tree." He pointed toward the bottom of the tree trunk. "In the Adidas bag I found a lunch he'd never eaten and some cigarettes, a lighter, and a Bible, a toiletries kit, and a can of pump-type toothpaste. He had on some trousers and a tank top, some old tennis shoes covered with dried paint. His car keys were in his pants pocket, car doors were unlocked. I'd say he was wearing his painting clothes when this happened. I also found the gun and a ballpoint pen near his hand but no note. Paper has probably long since disappeared."

No note. "Are you saying it was suicide, Don Earl?" I was finally beginning to choke up. I was hoping he wouldn't hear it in my voice, but I couldn't hide it. I never could. Whatever I felt, it always showed—in my voice if I had to speak, in my eyes if I didn't.

"Well, Nate was shot smack in the side of the head, the uh—" Don Earl lowered his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets and took a step toward me. "—bullet didn't pierce the other side of the skull. You okay, Marcy? You're pale..."

My knees buckled and hit the cold ground, my face in my gloves. I sat in the snow and grieved for my friend until I felt Don

Earl's strong bare hands grip my shoulders and pull me upward.

He held me against his chest, patting my back gently. "You knew him pretty well? I'm so sorry. I didn't know—" Don Earl's voice was low and smooth and he smelled comforting, like mild cedar and soap. I let out a breath that seemed to give me strength and he let go of me, steadying me, and I found I could stand on my own.

I wiped my face with my gloves, feeling tired. "Yeah, you could say he was a friend. I'm just sort of in shock. He licked the alcohol a long time ago, I know he never missed an A.A. meeting. He was very proud of his painting. He knew a lot about it, preparing surfaces—the surface had to be perfect before he'd start painting anything. . . ."

"You don't have to stay, go on home—"

"No, I'm fine now."

"Sure?"

I nodded, took another deep breath, and looked over at my friend's corpse, which Don Earl had wrapped up so carefully in a blanket of wool. I looked at the sheriff's gray eyes, now kind and concerned. "Thank you," I told him, and I knew I was speaking for Nathan Gregory.

"There was an empty bottle of gin and a gun case in the car. Nate had been out here long enough for . . . well, you know." Don Earl was trying to spare me the gory details. "Anyway, the gun was over there." He waved a hand at the ground he'd cleared of snow. "It's a .38 caliber snub-nosed revolver." Don Earl nodded at the body, took a step away, and deferred to me with a slight bow. "What do you think?"

"Nate always kept a revolver in his car. You say he was shot in the side of the head?" I asked, moving toward the tree where he said the skeleton had been propped. I craned my neck, examining the gnarled limbs extending from the main trunk. I was looking for a scar in the wood, where the bullet possibly shot out of the gun and ricocheted down. I didn't want it to be suicide. I backed up, stepping over roots protruding through the snow. "Okay, maybe Nate missed an A.A. meeting and had a relapse. That would explain the gin. But it could've been an accident, Don Earl. He found a good place to relax and maybe have a drink—he got comfortable against the trunk of the tree. Maybe he got too comfortable, fell asleep, finger got heavy, and the gun went off. The bullet hit up above, deflected, and came down . . ." I knew it sounded ridiculous.

Don Earl shuffled around in the snow. "Except—" He held his chin. "Mmm."

"Except what?"

He waited for me to answer my own question, then said, "I don't know. The bullet was in the side of the head, not the top, and if he came out here to relax as you say, why would he have brought a gun? The gun was not in the case."

"He was deer hunting? He was afraid?" I hugged myself, trying to stay warm. I wasn't making sense. Don Earl was being patient, probably wishing he'd never called me.

He rubbed the black and gray stubble sprinkled across his chin. "Accidents with guns usually happen when there's more than one person in the woods, the victim's wearing camouflage and gets mistaken for wild game. And Marcy, honey, nobody goes deer hunting with a snub-nosed .38."

"Accidents can happen under any circumstances with a gun," I reminded him. "People get careless . . ." I shivered and folded my arms. "I don't think it was suicide. He wouldn't do it. I just don't believe—"

"I know he was a friend of yours but the man had problems. I saw him a few months ago, looked like a walking zombie he was so thin and drawn."

"He always looked like that; it doesn't mean—"

"I respect you, Marcy, but I've seen this kind of thing before. This doesn't look anything like an accident and we can't go making it into some kind of murder investigation . . . not yet."

I could sense the cold creeping into my bones. The insulation of the snow seemed to close in and I felt, for an instant, suffocated. The woods were quiet but not serene, and I could almost smell it—danger or worry—like wood smoke sneaking around us from a source we couldn't grasp.

Don Earl didn't move or look in my direction. He just stood there, solidly, his hands loosely on his hips, his eyes distant and fixed on something over my shoulder.

He finally said, "Nate's car is just over there. I'll have to question a few people he worked for lately, if I can find any. I suspect he'd become pretty withdrawn."

He didn't say any more, but waited for me to speak, and I realized that that moment was why he'd wanted me there.

Limbs crackled somewhere around us, a tree branch where the weight of the snow had become too much to bear. We silently inhaled the cold and exhaled puffs of white.

My thoughts were squirming, trying to get away from me. "You

think somebody killed him?" It sounded erratic at first, then half-way plausible.

"He could've been shot first then put against the tree." Don Earl kicked at the snow around his feet.

I said, "Nate Gregory is not a big man. Tall but not that heavy. Probably weighs a hundred fifty-five soaking wet. But who would do that? And why?"

"Could've been a family member . . ."

I was shaking my head in the middle of his answer, something that would usually fluster him to the point of walking off and leaving. But Don Earl was calm, and it made me uneasy. "Nate didn't have any family," I said. He was staring now at the moss green army blanket, the knots he'd tied in four places along the length of the body.

"How long do you think he'd been there?" I watched Don Earl.

"A while. Weeks. From what I've seen in the past, about a month. I'd say he'd been dead against that tree at least since the day hunting season started. His clothes were lightweight, he would've been dressed more warmly had it been later in the season. Of course, we need to get an official date, send him to the medical examiner in Frankfort. Bullet probably matches the gun, and it'll be written up as a suicide. Otherwise—" He didn't finish, just shook his head. "It's too bad . . . Nate Gregory waited for a good-paying job like a kid waits for Christmas." He casually stuffed his cold, raw hands into his jeans pockets. As if finding Nathan Gregory like that hadn't had an effect on him.

I broke another thirty-second silence. "Doesn't it bother you, Don Earl, finding a month-old body out here on a cold winter morning? Doesn't it give you the shivers?"

He stared past me again, just above my head. "It bothers me, Marcy, finding a five-year-old kid in a trailer after his parents just up and left. It bothers me finding a highway mess where some irresponsible drunk ran over a perfectly good family on their way back from a Little League game. An adult man who in all probability shot himself doesn't bother me all that much, Marcy. No, it doesn't." His voice sounded clear and honest.

"I guess that's logical," I said quietly.

"This job can be humbling, Marcy. Sometimes you see facets of people you didn't know were there, didn't want to know were there. I don't talk about that part of it much. Wouldn't help me get elected."

My lips were growing numb. Don Earl's confiding in me like that felt too natural. And at that moment, for the record, I real-

ized he was not the uncomplicated straightlaced stalwart I'd always thought. The man had depth.

He peered through the trees where I'd left my truck and changed the subject. "I don't know what's taking Elmer so long to get out here. I called him to meet me before I left so we could haul in the body. Maybe he was afraid to come down here with the snow and all. I've already made some sketches, taken some pictures. I don't see how we can look for more evidence until everything thaws some. I'm freezing." Elmer Frazier was our newly elected county coroner. Don Earl looked at me quizzically. "Can you get your truck any closer? We need to haul this body in." He tugged on one of the rope straps, pulling the body across the snow a few feet.

"In my truck? You want to haul Nate in there?" My arms were unfolded, hanging at my sides.

"I can't just wait here all day on Elmer. And we can't leave Nate here, Marcy. Deer might get him. I don't want the bullet to be lost . . ."

"I can't get the truck any further in here," I said.

He stopped tugging and stood up, dropped his backpack on the ground, and threw off his hood, revealing a head of thick black tousled hair. We could see patches of my faded red truck through the trees. "It's not that far," I said. "Here, let me help."

We pulled on the ropes, our breaths colliding in a fog around us. We dragged the body in a serpentine path through the snow, across branches and leaves, and finally arrived, both of us winded, at the back of the truck. I unlatched the gate and it clanked open, causing snow to fall through the tree limbs around us. I leaned against the truck, cold air pricking my lungs.

Don Earl made eye contact, his arms around the head end of the body. "He'll be heavy," he said. "If you'll get the feet . . ." I wrapped my arms around what I felt to be knees. On the count of three we heaved upward. Don Earl managed to get his end of the body into the truck while my end sagged back into the snow. He quickly grabbed the rope he'd wrapped around the knees and rolled the rest of Nathan Gregory into the truck, then shut the gate with a bang.

I waited behind the steering wheel while he made a few adjustments, tucking the army blanket in where it had come loose. He walked back to the scene where he'd left his backpack and the Adidas bag, then slid into the cab beside me. I started the engine and cranked up the heat.

"Was I cordial enough?" I asked. My tires spun then took hold.

"Just barely." His gray eyes crinkled at the edges.



We'd reached the bottom of the ravine where the squad car was parked on the road above. Don Earl had been sitting up there for ten minutes gabbing on his walkie-talkie while I awaited further orders in the cozy warmth of my pickup.

He ducked out of the squad car, tromped purposefully toward me, and I rolled down the window, my breath puffing white again. He hesitated and observed me as if I were his last chance for all things fair and noble. "I'm going to have to change plans," he said. "I was gonna follow you to county headquarters where I could get somebody responsible to take the body to Frankfort—" He rubbed the back of his neck. "—but now there's a problem, an emergency. John Walker's boy is lost in the snow, been missing over an hour. I really need to get over there. Also Elmer got stuck on the bridge and needs help." He squinted one eye. "We should've elected a coroner with four-wheel drive. Think you can, uh, take him on in yourself?" He said it as if I were hauling a ton of dynamite.

As if I were not a responsible adult perfectly capable of driving myself into town.

"Of course," I said, a tad too crisply. "We'll be just fine, Don Earl. Me and, uh, Nate."

He gave me a stilted nod, headed back up to the road, and slid into the squad car. It spun for a second, then blue lights began to flash, and he was gone.

I could hear the fading siren as I gunned my truck and headed up the ravine. I had to keep refocusing my rearview mirror directly on Nate's body. Poor guy was sliding back and forth like a giant hockey puck. Surely a medical examiner could detect a bruise made after death. There would certainly be plenty to account for.

I was just inches from the asphalt, thinking we should've tied the body down, when my front tires hit a slick spot. I slammed on the brakes and rotated the steering wheel right, then left. The engine whirred and whined. The truck began to slide backward, down the ravine. I was almost to the bottom when I hit my brakes again hoping to salvage some of the distance I'd made.

That's when I heard the clank, the bumpety-bump. My back end felt suddenly lighter.

It was then I remembered the back gate had been known to come unlatched on occasion, all by itself. Feeling the truck was stable, I put on my emergency brake, praying the truck wouldn't roll backward over the body before I could get out and move it, destroy what evidence we had so far of Nate's death.

I stood ankle deep in the snow, more spitting down around me.

The body had landed about fifteen feet away from the truck in a clearing, away from any trees. The army blanket was wadded in places and had slipped out from under the rope. I had partial views of black plastic and clothing, and low-top, paint-spattered tennis shoes.

I lifted up on one of the ropes and let go. I'd had trouble getting just half of the body into the back of the truck.

I knew I couldn't drag it fifteen feet, then haul it again all by myself.

I was five miles from town, couldn't get a signal on my cell phone, and had no idea in what direction I might find a land line. When I didn't show up at sheriff's headquarters in an hour or so, Don Earl would send somebody looking for me. Or I could leave the body where it was, and try to get help myself. I would need someone strong and able-bodied who could help lift the body into the pickup.

Of course, I thought of Clint Knuckles, my colleague and, of late, loyal companion. He would be at the high school gym finishing up his ritual Saturday morning faculty basketball game. If I could drive up the ravine, I could be at the high school in twenty minutes, get Clint, then another twenty would get us back to the body. We'd be at the sheriff's headquarters in two hours tops, hopefully before Don Earl noticed I'd taken too long.

I pulled the army blanket together gingerly, pulled on the rope knots, tightening them, and laid a couple of pine branches on top. Then I sat in the truck for a minute cursing Don Earl for taking up my Saturday morning, pay or no, for a sorry body-hauling job requiring the strength of two stout men.

I pulled to the left, and made my own brand-new tire ruts up the ravine. The truck shot upward. I was on the asphalt in three seconds flat.

Clint was at the free throw line with the clock winding down. His team, four middle-aged male teachers wearing various shades and styles of red T-shirts, was winning by six. He made the two points look easy and jogged down to the other goal. He spotted me standing all bundled up at the double doors that led into the gym, then smiled and signaled a peace sign, meaning he'd be two seconds. He stole the ball and took it down court for a slam that ended the game. After that there was a lot of rear slapping and hand shaking and cajoling Clint about why didn't he take the opening for head basketball coach at Deerfoot High. He shook his head and told them "no" for the hundredth time, shrugged out of

the huddle, and strolled toward me, slinging a towel around his glistening shoulders.

"I'm flattered," he said. "You came to watch me play." I had to remind myself to breathe. Looking at Clint's blue-green eyes, all lit up as usual, and hearing his creamy voice made heaven seem like a two-bit carnival. "You're a little late, though—" He paused. "You're on a case, aren't you? You need some help?"

I pulled off my scarf. "How can you tell?"

"You look serious."

"You can play like that *and* read minds?"

He smiled. "What's up?"

"It's confidential—"

"Of course."

"I need you to help me . . . get a body into my truck."

He didn't flinch. Just kept his hands loosely gripping the towel around his neck. Then his eyebrows went up, two gables framing pools of Caribbean green. "Is this a dead body, or—"

"Deceased. Yes," I sighed, wondering if I could say it. "Maybe a suicide. I'm helping out Don Earl this morning." Clint looked down, then back at me. "He needed a four-wheel drive. I thought I could handle it but it rolled out—"

"Wait here, I'll be two minutes."

He jogged toward the men's locker room and all I could think of was how I'd left Nate lying there in the snow under a few meager pine branches, waiting for a professional autopsy and a proper burial.

While Clint was getting dressed, I used the phone in the principal's office to call sheriff's headquarters. The receptionist on duty told me Don Earl was still occupied with the Walker boy. Elmer Frazier was out of pocket, probably hitching a ride in the tow truck that was hauling his van into town, and it was assumed by all that Junior Henderson and his girlfriend were "stranded" in Lexington.

The snow had not let up, and according to the truck radio, the temperature had dipped to twenty-two degrees.

I explained the situation in detail as I drove. Clint shifted his knees, which were shoved against the dashboard, and put his arm across the seat, scooting closer to me.

He cuddled beside me, commenting on how deserted everything looked, when a white SUV with darkly tinted windows sped past going the opposite direction. My heart rate quickened and I swerved a little to the right. "Whoa," said Clint, looking over his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

I exhaled and said, "I'll be fine."

We reached the ravine and I carefully drove down the shallow grade, Clint holding on to the dashboard, bumping his head once on the roof.

"Here we are," I said with relief, pulling the emergency brake. We emerged from our respective car doors and met each other at the front of the truck, where at first I thought I was at the wrong place because the body was nowhere in sight. I stood there in the snow, my hand above my forehead like an Indian scouting for buffalo. Clint had on his high-top Nikes, sweat pants, and a thin windbreaker. He casually glanced around, into the woods. "Where's the body, Marse?" he said, and I suddenly loathed being the one in charge.

I couldn't speak. I'd dragged Clint out on a winter morning to take advantage of his good nature only to make myself look more foolish than I already did. He followed me as I approached a burrow in the snow where the body had been. Footprints surrounded the indentation and strange tire tracks led to the opposite side of the ravine. I kicked at the snow where pine branches, the ones I'd covered the body with, lay scattered around my feet. All I could say was, "Don Earl . . ."

"You think maybe the sheriff came and, uh, got the body?" Clint was trying to be reassuring, bless his heart. He was wandering toward the other side of the ravine, where new tire tracks were deeply rutted into the snow.

"I don't think so," I said. "I made a call at the school. Sheriff was still at the Walker place."

I'd already noticed the oversized tracks, made by a large truck or a heavy utility vehicle. The speeding SUV we passed on the road crossed my mind. I tried to remember it . . . shiny and pretentious, the word *status* stuck in my mind.

I was leaning against the back of the truck in a stupor wishing I had a whole pack of cigarettes and a shot of stout whiskey, even though I'd never smoked and rarely drank the hard stuff straight.

I let it sink in. Don Earl had indulged me, taken me into his confidence, put me in charge, and I'd blown it.

"No, I don't think it was Don Earl," I told Clint. "He couldn't have gotten back that quickly and those tracks aren't squad car tracks."

"No, they're not," he said, hands on thighs, squatting, peering into the freshly made tire tracks as if they were dinosaur footprints. He was quiet, then looked up at me painfully. He knew how humiliated I was feeling. "Who do you think?" he said.

Trouble was, I couldn't think. I was freezing, I'd lost a body in the prime of the morning, and when Don Earl found out, I'd be at the top of his bumpkin list for sure. I drew in a cold breath. "It could be the unit Suburban. Maybe the sheriff got hold of Junior Henderson and he came out to help and found the body," I said, hoping I was wrong. The last thing I needed was for some deputy to clean up after me.

He shrugged. "These tracks are big. Whatever it was, it handled the snow pretty easily. You get a good look at that car that passed us?" He stood up. I shook my head. "And you're not sure it was a suicide?" He was walking toward me.

"No, I'm not so sure."

Clint scratched his head. "I'm just thinking, if it wasn't the sheriff, or the deputy, or the coroner, it was somebody else who knew the body was here. Who else would come down this ravine today, in this weather?"

"Don Earl said some kids found the body in the woods, but I doubt . . ." My voice trailed. Clint and I were both quiet, not saying a word, hardly breathing.

Numbly, Clint helped me into the passenger seat of my truck, shut the door, slid behind the wheel, and asked me to show him where the body had been found. I mumbled directions back into the canopy of snow.

We drove into the woods, retracing the path I'd taken before, making a left turn at Don Earl's limp yellow tape, parking the truck where Don Earl and I had loaded the body. I got out and Clint followed me to the scene of the "suicide" and stood where Don Earl had been standing before.

I studied Nate's car about ten yards to my right, near the tree where the body had been propped. The pile of snow covering the car made it look like a gargantuan marshmallow. My eyes scaled the tree trunk into a never-ending maze of frosted branches reaching upward and out. I looked toward the car again.

Don Earl hadn't thought of it, and neither had I. In our minds, we'd looked no further than Nate's alcoholism, the most likely story. A story someone else had wanted us to believe. I knew Nate had kept a .38 revolver in his car and when Don Earl told me, I figured it was the suicide weapon. That much made sense. He'd said the car keys had been in Nate's pants pocket. That much made sense too. Nate had a habit of pocketing his car keys.

I walked over to the car. Don Earl had knocked enough snow from the sides to be able to open the doors, then locked them to prevent any further tampering. I wiped the frost from the window

on the driver's side and peered inward, spotting a few cassette tapes on the floor and some paint supplies in the back. The car looked clean.

I took a step back. It didn't make sense. Why had Nate driven his car that far into the woods to shoot himself? There was no road, not even a path, just a very heavily wooded area. It was difficult enough getting my four-wheel drive in as far as I did. It would have made more sense if Nate had parked his car more closely to the path and walked into the woods, or just pulled the trigger in the car.

Why did Nate get out of the car just to walk ten or so yards, sit by a tree, and pull the trigger?

Or did someone carry him? Arranging the body outside instead of inside the car would ensure more rapid decay, make identification and procuring evidence more difficult. Did his murderer drive deep into the woods, away from the road, to ease the process of moving him to an obscure site? *Just get him as far into the woods as possible, and the less likely he'll be found soon.*

Clint was edging around the car, his Nikes filling with snow. He said, "Marse? What're you thinking?"

I moved away from the car, stopped, studied the location of it, and looked back at Clint.

"This is the first freeze of the season, right?" I said. Clint nodded at me, an irresistible half smile on his face. He zipped his jacket all the way up and folded his arms. "This is the first real cold we've had for any length of time."

Clint said "Yep," his red jacket a blur before me as I spoke.

"The first chance of the season for a decaying body to freeze up would be today. Bodies are more pleasant to get rid of when they're frozen," I said, the sound of my own voice muffled. He stepped closer and was soon on the ground standing directly in front of me, his face cold and flushed, blue-green eyes flashing. We began walking back to the truck. He held my door open.

"Much more pleasant." Clint slid into the passenger seat beside me.

"If Nate was murdered—" I placed a hand on the steering wheel. "—maybe the killer had been thinking about Nate's body out here in the woods, thinking that he needed to remove some evidence left behind, in case somebody figured out it wasn't an accident. In case the medical examiner extracted a bullet that didn't match Nate's snub-nosed revolver. Except the killer has been praying for a big freeze, needed to wait until the cold came because, well . . ."

Clint finished my thought. "Things had probably gotten pretty nasty after a few weeks. The killer rushed out here this morning

to get the body, found it lying there in the snow, and took it. No body, no evidence."

"Hell of a surprise," I said. "It didn't matter the body had already been discovered and was waiting, all wrapped and lying far away from the crime scene. The killer's bullet, the real evidence, was with Nate."

"And the killer had to have it." We sat in the truck, silvery shadows closing in around us.

Then Clint said softly, "So who's the killer?"

I laid my head on the steering wheel. "I don't know."

Clint was quiet on the drive into town, arm across the seat behind me, gazing thoughtfully past the windshield. The snow was light as I pulled into the high school parking lot beside his vintage '71 Plymouth Barracuda. He gave me a quick kiss then and a look that told me he wouldn't go far.

I dragged myself to the service porch of Prudence Geasley's 1859 Queen Anne Victorian, Deerfoot's only landmark, just two blocks from Main Street. The separate entrance from the service porch led to the entire upstairs portion of the house and was ideal for renters. And the Victorian's location was ideal for business purposes, something my late husband had taken advantage of during his criminal defense years. Back then, his trying to persuade me I was a natural detective only convinced me he was too cheap to hire a real P.I. and too busy investigating the shapes of female divorcées to hunt for incriminating documents in courthouses. So the tasks befell me when I wasn't grading umpteen incorrect math problems or chaperoning proms and crafting homecoming floats. I now had my own unofficial reputation, or as Prudie had put it, a knack for snooping.

I'd long since taken down the sign reading JEB E. MURDOCK, LAWYER with a crooked arrow pointing in and up, and sold the oversized house we'd purchased as a couple. I'd decorated the upstairs to my liking and declared it my residence. The rent was reasonable, and the loft of the Victorian had its perks, like stained glass and arched doorways and a cozy window seat I'd filled with velvet cushions. Also, Prudie had maintained the old place admirably with the help of people like Nate Gregory.

The sky was still overcast and it was early afternoon. I noticed the wraparound gingerbread Nate had so carefully painted last summer, the nooks and crannies now perfectly lined with snow. I stomped the debris off of my feet and opened the door, trudged

the eleven steps up to my living room, and sat down on my antique Georgian settee. With my eyes, I traced the pattern on the Oriental rug I'd bought while Jeb and I were married.

I knew they were coming—Prudie's broom thumped from below. As a tenant it was a drawback, the "broom code" she'd invented to let me know when the rent was due or that "for a proper date, Clint had grossly overstayed his welcome." This time, I figured she was just dying to know what had taken me out so early on a snowy morning, the morning she'd so avidly warned me about. I made that cup of tea I'd been craving and then it came. Two loud thumps, a warning she would soon arrive in all her glory, ready or not. I heard her curse the weather before she knocked.

"It's open," I called, standing at the top of the stairs holding my teacup. Her head appeared first, and her blue eyes had such a menacing brightness to them you didn't notice the fair-skinned wrinkles or the crop of white frizzy hair she'd donned with a plastic shower cap. She stepped in wearing her oversized yellow galoshes, her small frame enveloped in a red flannel housecoat over some kind of granny gown she'd misbuttoned all the way to her throat. One hand was clenched around a half full bottle of vodka, and a basket swung from her elbow.

"Dad-burn blobber of snow hit me right smack on the crown from that elm out there. Knew this thing would come in handy." She grabbed the shower cap and threw it to the floor, shook off her galoshes, and started up my steps in her sock feet like a grandmother headed for a slumber party at the old folks' home. She stopped when she met me at the top, and gave me a stiff rub on the back. "You look like hell froze over and nobody told you," she said.

"It's—" I started.

"I know." She read my face like a treasure map. "Sheriff already called here looking for you. He sounded real anxious. Said he found Nate Gregory this morning dead as road kill. Said he found him in the woods and it looked just like a suicide. I told him to phone Clint, that he'd probably know where you were, that you two had been thicker than thieves . . ."

I stood, my coat still on, holding my tea. Great, I thought. Don Earl would know all about Nate's lost corpse by the time he confronted me. Clint was a shoo-in when it came to looks and charm, but the man couldn't keep a secret if he had the last one on earth.

She pointed to my sofa with the bottle and said, "Sit. Sit down right now, Marcy girl." I took my tea to the sofa and followed orders, the aroma from the basket of muffins the most soothing

thing I'd encountered all day. She tossed me one, walked over to the window seat and looked out, then at me. "I've lived a long time, sweetie. People die and turn into skeletons. It's a sad fact but they do. But let me tell you something. Nate Gregory did okay. He was a fine man, in his own way." She shook her head and grunted. "I used to watch his little rear wiggle up that ladder with a bucket of paint, used to make my day."

"Prudie," I cautioned her.

"I may be old, missy, but I am not blind nor am I incapacitated. Of course, he was no Clint Knuckles. Now Clint has the most adorable—"

"Prudie!"

"Well, I'm just saying Nate was most definitely the sexiest painter I ever saw." I rolled my eyes. "And the man did not squander his days. He loved his work. He was happy, at least when I knew him, he was. And he was ready to go if his time came . . . he was ready. And that, my dear, is all one can hope for." Her voice waned. "A cute bottom, yes, and a ready soul."

I unbuttoned my coat and sighed, "Yeah." I got up and stood beside her. We watched the snow come down beyond the window seat. "Prudie, was Nate working for anybody else when he was here in July? Did he mention anybody at all?"

"Oh yes. Yes, he did and her name was Jane, no . . . Jan. She was one of his steady employers, owned a huge house over in Northfield that needed paint constantly. He told me she was married to a lawyer."

"What lawyer? Do you know the last name?"

She nodded her head. "Mmm. A bigwig over there, it was Price, I believe."

"Boyd Price," I said, and the name gave me goose bumps. Boyd Price had no rules when it came to winning a case. He had a reputation for slandering perfectly good mothers during custody battles and winning for fathers who weren't capable of raising children at all. "Jeb used to run around with him. He does a lot of divorce and child custody. In fact he was campaign manager for the family court judge over there, Charlotte Townsend."

Prudie's ears perked up. "Townsend? Is that one of the Kentucky Supreme Court Townsends?"

I nodded. "It's his wife. A few years after Jim Townsend was appointed to the state supreme court, the governor appointed Mrs. Townsend, his wife, to this judgeship. It was a totally political appointment and a lot of people didn't think she was qualified. Until then, she was in private practice. The governor's

appointment lasted a year, then she had to run for office. Boyd Price's law firm ran her campaign and she won."

"Well, I do not care for lawyers." She made a hissing sound and eyed a plump, warm muffin. I was thumbing through my phone book, looking for the address of Boyd Price. He lived at 100 Emerald Lane. I drank the rest of my tea and buttoned my coat.

Prudie scrunched her face into a frown and swallowed. "Now where are you going again? I was going to make us some Bloody Marys." She lifted up the vodka bottle, showing me.

"Don't worry." I grabbed another muffin from her basket and headed down the stairs.

"But the sheriff said he was coming over here and he did not sound elated."

I stopped on the stairs and yelled up to her, "Offer him a Bloody Mary. He's gonna need it."

The interstate had been scraped and salted. I'd driven eighteen miles to Northfield on I-75, then stopped at a local gas station for directions—a mile or so past Main Street, then a left turn near a rural church.

I found the house in a group of expensive homes scattered along a peaceful stretch of rolling hills. The Prices lived in a two story brick with pale yellow shutters and two stately columns in front. The roof was topped with a weather vane and an indecisive arrow that couldn't decide which way the wind was blowing, and the elaborate landscaping was a mass of white. I parked in the driveway beside a dark green van and took a shoveled walkway to the front door, where miniature evergreens were potted on each side of the porch steps. I knocked the snow off my shoes and found a doorbell.

A woman I recognized as Jan Price answered right away. She opened the door slightly, letting the aroma of brewed coffee waft into the cold air where I stood.

She tucked her shoulder-length hair behind her ears. "Hi, can I help you?" she said, tentatively, looking beyond me as if I might have brought someone else. She was fortyish, about my own age, with light brown hair and deep brown eyes, and wore an expensive sage-colored sweater.

"Oh," she said, upon seeing my strained smile, which was all I could muster in the midst of my current crisis. "Why, I know you, you're—" She snapped her fingers.

"Marcy Murdock. Jeb was my husband. He knew Boyd."

"That's right, that's right. How are you, Mrs. Murdock?"

"Please call me Marcy." I hesitated. "I hate to bother you on a morning like this, but—"

"Don't tell me. You've got car trouble. Second one today. I've got jumper cables in the utility closet—"

"No, I'm here about something else, someone else. . . . It's Nathan Gregory. His body was found this morning. He was a friend of mine and I understand he did some work for you. Do you mind if we talk?"

I could see the light in her brown eyes fade. "Please, come in," she said, ushering me into an elegant room reminiscent of an English parlor. I sat down on a leather sofa in front of an immense coffee table stacked with books about architecture and a polished silver tray bearing crystal. Across the room, a floor-to-ceiling window was hung with heavy burgundy draperies trimmed in gold fringe. A portrait of two children, painted in smoky muted shades, hung above a lit fireplace flanked with mahogany bookshelves. The room was capped all around with glossy crown molding. She turned on a burnished copper lamp and sat beside me, her white wool pants perfectly creased.

I sighed. "Mrs. Price—"

"Jan. Please. I was at your husband's funeral, you probably don't remember."

"No, I'm sorry. That time was such a blur for me." I cleared my throat.

"I understand. Do you have any children?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Are those yours?" I nodded toward the painting above the mantel.

"Yes. You turn around and they've grown up on you. It's hard to adjust to sometimes. But then, nothing stays the same. Children grow, friends become distant . . ." She seemed wistful, then added, "Even people you thought you knew just become someone else." She turned toward me. "I haven't heard from Nate in a long time . . . I wondered." She brushed her hair from her face and I noticed her hands were impeccably manicured.

"I'm just concerned about how he died. He'd mentioned he worked for you and I thought you could help me find some answers."

"What kind of answers?" Before I could respond, she asked, "How did it happen?"

"Gunshot. Looked like suicide. Happened about a month ago," I said, knowing full well Don Earl would not approve of my tactics. I watched her face. She looked away and folded her arms, then shook her head. I sensed her disparity and confusion.

"Are you working with the sheriff on this?" she asked.

"No. I'm just not convinced Nate took his own life. Is your husband here? If I could ask him some questions . . ."

"My husband has my children for the day. He took them skiing in West Virginia. I could answer anything he could. But there's really nothing to tell. Mr. Gregory did good work, and I am terribly sorry about his death, but he had a drinking problem, you know." The tone of her voice had changed. It had become insincere, perhaps a façade hiding what she feared to be the truth.

"When did he last work for you? Did he mention anyone else he was working for?" I felt a tinge of panic and wondered whether or not the Prices owned a white SUV. Jan Price knew more than she was telling, and her initial welcoming manner was definitely slipping away.

"No, I don't know of any others he worked for. He just painted the crown molding and the shutters outside, then went on his way. I'm afraid I can't help you any further than that." Her voice was now unfriendly; she seemed suddenly preoccupied, as if she were protecting someone. She stood, tucking her hair behind her diamond-clad ears. "I would offer you coffee but I'm afraid I have some phone calls to make. My mother lives alone and I really need to check on her. I'm sorry you came all the way out here for nothing."

She did not see me to the door. I took the hint and headed toward the marble foyer, and let myself out.

"No, I do not want a Bloody Mary, or coffee with half-and-half, or tea, or any other beverage on your menu," Don Earl said sternly. "I hardly think this is the time for happy hour," he sputtered, wearing the same hooded jacket and jeans he'd had on this morning. He'd already worn a dirt path on my Oriental rug and had not even had the decency to remove his boots after tromping around in the woods for the better part of the morning. It didn't help matters that he'd found John Walker's little boy asleep in an upstairs closet after three hours of yelling in the snow, and that nobody had heard from Junior Henderson all day.

"Why, it's nearly five o'clock in the afternoon. That's exactly what I'd call happy hour," Prudie said girlishly. She sat on my sofa stirring the last of her second cocktail with a celery stick, and Clint, freshly dressed in clean Levi's and a flannel shirt, sat at my butternut drop leaf table savoring the remnants of three muffins scattered on one of my blue willow breakfast plates.

"There's no need to yell, Don Earl," I said, leaning on the arm of my antique Georgian settee. I set the last of my own Bloody Mary on the coffee table.

He spun around and eyed me. "I believe it's a fine time to yell, Marcy. If ever there was a time to yell, this is it. Do you realize that in all my years of sheriffing I have never lost a corpse? Not once." He looked back and forth from me to Clint to Prudie.

"That's why we elected you, Sheriff." Prudie lifted her glass, making a toast. "Here's to no lost corpses—" She took a sip. "—and corpses lost and found."

Clint, ignoring Prudie, stood up and faced Don Earl, his six-foot-tall athletic frame making its own statement. "You can't blame Marcy for this. If this district would elect decent county officials—"

"Are you saying *I'm* not decent, Mr. Knuckles?" Don Earl pointed at himself.

"Wait just one cotton-pickin' blithering minute." Prudie stood up, wavering, shaking her celery stick. "I do not allow grown men to have full-blown hissy fits in my house. If you men want to duke it out, just go right outside in the snow and have at it. Marcy and I'll watch from the window here. Marcy, wanna make a wager?" She pointed the celery at Don Earl, then back at Clint. Don Earl quickly zipped his jacket and headed down the stairs, fuming.

Prudie, who announced she would not be cooking anything else that day, teetered home for a nap. Clint, whose stomach had begun growling ferociously and who knew my cupboards all too well, declared the muffins a mere appetizer and volunteered to go rustle us up some real dinner and fetch it back before nightfall.

Clint had been gone an hour. It was a few minutes past seven when I began to consider the tire tracks that we'd seen were an illusion, that some wild animal had dragged Nate's body far into the woods. I had been sitting at my desk making notes on everything Nate had ever told me, from his days in the Korean War to his belief that honesty was the most important trait any human could exercise. He'd said owning up was growing up.

The snow had quit falling but the temperature had plummeted to below twenty degrees. I'd been leaning back in Jeb's oak swivel chair, watching the white hills beyond Deerfoot back up against an early dusk, when the old black rotary phone brought me back to reality.

I said, "This is Marcy—" and then it all drifted back and I was beginning to feel I could trace it—the wood smoke, the source of the danger I had sensed before. She had been waiting for some time, waiting to hear from him. She'd been rather worried when he had not returned. She'd thought it would be the sheriff or the police with the news, not her neighbor who'd heard it from me. She had known Jeb and, oh, he was such a fine lawyer.

It was Judge Charlotte Townsend. Jan Price had phoned her and told her of my visit. Mrs. Price had recommended Nate to her in September and she had hired him. He stayed for about three weeks and never came back to finish painting her gazebo. She'd tried to contact him but couldn't reach him. Then his phone was disconnected; she thought it was because he couldn't afford it.

"I suppose you know he had a problem with alcohol," she said, her voice cool and practiced. Why had she called me and not the sheriff if she'd been one of Nate's last employers and probably one of the last to see him alive? She obviously did not know the drill. But then she probably knew nothing of criminal law except what she'd seen from TV. She was a family court judge dealing mostly with divorces and child custody issues.

"He'd been sober five years last time I saw him," I said.

"Recovery at his age is very difficult, Ms. Murdock. Attempts at it are very frustrating and usually end badly."

"Did Nate mention working for anyone else or maybe having a girlfriend?" I asked her.

"No, I really don't think he had anyone. That was part of his problem," she said. "He seemed rather depressed at times."

"I see," I humored her, and then I caught on. She thought Jan Price had told me about the recommendation, that I already knew Nate had worked at her home shortly before his death. And her best plan? To be aggressive and tell all, pretend she was on his side. Maybe she was, and maybe not. But Jan Price had lied to me, told me she knew of no other employers under whom Nate had worked. Had she been trying to protect Charlotte Townsend?

It was still daylight when I revved up my pickup again, blasting the truck's heater. I drove to Northfield for the second time. The interstate was deserted except for a few eighteen wheelers and a salt truck moving slowly along one lane.

I pulled off the exit and shortly found myself in front of Jan Price's door again.

I could hear her heels clicking toward me. When she opened the door, I immediately said, "Charlotte Townsend phoned me."

"Okay. I fibbed." Her shoulders dropped. I could tell she'd been crying. "I don't want to involve Boyd," she said stoically. "Boyd did what any man would do, he has to make a living, support his family."

I stood with my back to the fireplace. Jan Price straightened a delicate painting of grazing horses, then stopped at the oversized window, her hands brought up in a praying position to her chin.

"Mrs. Townsend wants to involve Boyd," I said, playing along.

She turned around, hands on hips, her mouth open in disbelief, and stomped across the room. "But we're *friends*. Boyd has connections through the Townsends all over the state, he is very politically involved with the Townsends, I can't believe Charlotte would destroy that—" She shook her head. "Boyd *has* told me things. He wasn't like he is now, not when we first married. He's changed. But it's a cutthroat world out there sometimes and . . . you know."

"What kind of things?" I said, and waited.

And then she told me about how her husband and Judge Charlotte Townsend had a pact. The deal that if he never lost a case in her court, he would support her campaign vigorously. He would get a reputation as a lawyer who couldn't lose and would make money hand over fist, and in turn a lot of that money would be used to make sure she maintained her judgeship. It worked. For them.

She told me that every man who had hired her husband during custody battles had gotten custody of his children through Judge Charlotte Townsend. She said Boyd would come home bragging with stories of grieving mothers, perfectly good stay-at-home moms who had breast-fed their babies, who had lost primary custody of their children. He told her Charlotte Townsend was brilliant, that she would use the same vague terminology over and over again; that the "court was concerned about the mother's ability to co-parent." Charlotte would verbally twist the wording of custodial evaluations that were in favor of the mother in order to win the case for her husband, Boyd Price.

She told me and I listened, feeling sickened with every word. I said, "And to appeal was worthless because—"

"Charlotte Townsend had further connections in the court of appeals because of her husband Jim. A mother called me once, Marcy. She was very upset and wanted me to know that Boyd had represented her estranged husband during a custody battle over their eight-month-old baby. I don't know why but I heard her out. She seemed so desperate. This mother was intelligent and ambitious and had decided to start a new life for herself. She was working part-time on her certificate to teach high school science. Judge Townsend gave primary custody of the child to the father because the mother had not gotten the court's permission to attend college classes. It was ludicrous. I also found out the woman's husband was a prominent lawyer. It's scary, Marcy. And it's got to be stopped. Charlotte Townsend has got to be stopped." She stood at the window, and covered her face with her hands. "But Boyd . . .

He's my husband, the father of my children. Please, I don't want anyone to know."

Jeb had said it once. No matter what the law, judges can do anything they want. I had heard Charlotte Townsend was difficult on women, that she was tough and hardened, but I had no idea she had sold out. "And what about Nate?" I asked her, feeling the hot warmth from the fire on the backs of my calves.

Her eyes drifted beyond the window. Snowflakes were coming down again through the last bit of daylight. She spoke slowly and carefully, as if in sync with the rhythm of the floating snow. "It was several weeks ago," she began. "I was always looking for good-paying jobs for Nate. He's an honest man and a good painter.

"We've been good friends with the Townsends over the years. They live here in Northfield in a secluded area and it's not a bad commute to the capitol for Justice Townsend. They wanted someone trustworthy, so they took my word and hired Nate to do the painting. It was quite a job, a couple of indoor rooms they were redecorating and a huge outdoor deck and gazebo they'd had built." She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"All I know is that Boyd came home one day cursing a blue streak. He said he'd been talking privately to Charlotte in the house about, you know, things about cases that could not be said over the phone or in the courthouse where people could hear. Things that could get them both into big trouble if anybody heard it or repeated it. But apparently Nate had been in one of the rooms quietly painting and overheard everything they'd said. Nate told Judge Townsend that she would have to get another painter, that he just could not finish the job after what he had heard. She told him to wait out by the gazebo and they would talk about it. Then she told Boyd to go home. Boyd said he saw the painter, Nate, smoking a cigarette in the gazebo when he was driving away." She backed up against the window, facing me. "Marcy, when Boyd came home that night, he seemed, I don't know, different. He even spoke, for the first time, about getting out of private practice and maybe teaching somewhere at a law school. A few weeks later, Charlotte asked me if I had heard from Nate, said that he hadn't come back to finish the job."

In my mind I saw images of a beautifully painted gazebo and a gun . . . and ugly secrets slipping out of bounds into the hands of an honest man. I heard myself sigh and gathered my thoughts. "Do the Townsends, by any chance, have some kind of SUV, white?"

"Yeah, a Cadillac Escalade. Brand new."

"Do you think they're home right now?"

"Probably, but why?" I could tell by the sound of her voice she was reluctant, but maybe willing. Jan Price had gotten caught up in the money game, the greed and the power, but she wanted out of the prison it had created for her. "I need to look for evidence," I said. "I need to nail Charlotte Townsend. Today." I thought she understood. "I know I can do it, but it has to be now. Today." I was begging.

Jan sat straight up. "You won't tell anyone, will you, that she and Boyd—I just want Charlotte Townsend stopped . . . and I want my husband back."

I thought about it. Charlotte Townsend would never disclose the pact she'd had with Boyd Price. It would never come to light unless I testified.

"No, I won't tell," I said, thinking of all the children who had suffered under the insidious pact. She pulled out a drawer from beneath the coffee table, reached in, and found some paper and a pen. "Their house key is under the flowerpot by the back door. An alarm may go off. If it does punch in this code by the back door." She scribbled some numbers down on the paper and handed it to me. "They live about a mile and a half down the road, large stucco house on the right with a long driveway, pine trees everywhere. There's a dog inside, but she's harmless. Her name's Justice, of all things. Stupid name for a dog. I feed her and water their plants when they go on vacation." She closed the drawer and wrung her hands and tucked her hair behind her ears. "Need anything else?"

"My cell phone's not working," I said. She walked into another room and tossed me a sleek, thin cell phone.

"I'll call you if anything goes wrong and you need to get out," she said.

"It shouldn't take long." I stood up. "One more thing. Could you—"

"Wait," she said, reaching for a phone on an end table. She dialed and waited.

"Jim? Hi, slow work day, huh?" She laughed wonderfully. "Got back in this morning early before Charlotte got out of bed? You stayed in Frankfort last night? Oh, the budget. You are a workaholic. Hey, are you keeping your wife company all alone over there?" Pause. "Really." Laugh. "Well, I'm making hot lattes over here and I've got a handful of cards and no dealer. You and Charlotte want to come over?" Pause. "Oh, come on, y'all need to get out. Please. I'm lonely. Boyd's out of town and . . . Great. How about half an hour? See you then." She hung up. Her eyes were

wet with tears and she said, "Nothing will happen to Boyd, right?" I shook my head without saying a word.

I waited with Jan for another ten minutes and then took a drive past the Townsends' sprawling stucco on at least ten acres of land bordered by a black wooden fence, then doubled back, found a hidden spot on the side of the road, and waited. The truck's heater was meagerly keeping up with the drop in temperature. Finally a white Cadillac Escalade with tinted windows harboring two adults came slowly down and across the winding driveway through the pines and toward the Prices'. As soon as they were out of sight I pulled into the driveway between rows of spired evergreens. There was no garage, and I parked beneath a wide carport with a trellis on one side which was laden with twisted wisteria vines. I saw the gazebo, a giant hexagon with a cone-shaped roof extending from a wooden deck, around the other side of the house.

I eased out of the truck fully aware that I, along with my accomplice Jan Price, was breaking and entering.

The back patio was surrounded by a black wrought-iron gate, each metal picket topped with a sharp point. I unlatched the gate and walked through, past a frozen birdbath, toward the back door where four clay flowerpots were filled with dirt and cracked from the cold. I found a large silver key hidden beneath the smallest pot. I had no sooner unlocked the deadbolt and doorknob when a piercing siren exploded from inside the house. I slipped inside and shut the door, found a keypad on the wall, and quickly punched in the four numbers Jan had given me. Magically, the alarm was silenced although I could hear a small dog frantically yelping in another room.

I was standing in a short hallway, but the kitchen was just around the corner, a spacious pale yellow room with a backsplash of blue and white Mexican tile. Maple cabinets lined the walls. The house was magnificent—open and airy, with skylights and beams spanning the ceilings. The hardwood floors were covered with plush rugs in rusts, yellows, and greens.

I stood in the middle of the stairwell where fading daylight spilled from a window high above. Hardwood stairs with pine railings rose up toward an entrance framed in rustic oak beams.

I took the stairway to the second floor where four bedrooms were served by a wide hallway lined with framed photos of the Townsends standing with suited politicians. In one picture Charlotte Townsend sat alone on her bench. She was a plump woman with shoulder-length dark hair and sleepy blue eyes

reflecting an indifference to everything her flowing black robe represented, except power. I hurried along the hallway and found the master bedroom—more ceiling beams and a window with stained oak trim overlooking the gazebo. I peered out thinking that, in fact, the gazebo was rather close. So close that if Nate had been standing out there smoking a cigarette, Charlotte Townsend could easily have put a bullet through his skull with a rifle, then hauled his body to the woods, inserting Nate's own gun to fake the suicide.

Don Earl had also told me the bullet had not pierced the skull. That thought probably hadn't occurred to Mrs. Townsend until days after the body had been propped against the tree. By then, the body had started to decay and it was too late to dispose of it without a smelly ordeal, and once an autopsy was done, a murder investigation would ensue. So they had waited until the first freeze, hoping the body would still be there.

They. Of course she'd had help. Somebody had to drive Nate's car into the woods, leave it there, and then drive back to town in another vehicle. Unless Jan had lied about Boyd skiing in West Virginia, it looked as if the Supreme Court of Kentucky would soon have a vacancy.

"Geeze," I mumbled to myself, making my way back down the hallway, "only a couple of lawyers would steal a body in broad daylight."

I jogged back downstairs, Justice barking like crazy behind a door I found to be the laundry room. I reached down and picked her up, a warm handful of stringy black fur and red-ribboned ears. Absolutely useless.

"Justice, sshhh," I ordered. She sat quite happily in my arms, occasionally licking my gloves as I walked quickly through the house, finding a door on the first floor, next to a sunroom, slightly ajar. The door led downstairs to a basement, unfinished with plywood steps and unpainted drywall. I found a light switch and stepped downward into the smell of mildew, holding Justice near my heart. Down below were cardboard boxes full of Christmas decorations and clothing, gaudy flower urns, and items that looked like leftovers from a yard sale. I saw it then, a large rectangular thing in a corner . . . a freezer. Justice barked and I cradled her gently with two arms. The top of the freezer had been taped down with two strips of silver duct tape. I straddled boxes, making my way toward the corner, and tore away the tape with one hand, while holding Justice in the other.

I opened the lid. The freezer was less than six feet long but they

had managed to stuff the body in nicely among their steaks and frozen gourmet entrees, army blanket and all.

I closed the lid to the freezer and headed back upstairs to make a phone call to Don Earl, Justice curled up in the crook of my elbow. I dialed the sheriff's office and the nineteen-year-old receptionist told me he'd been sitting out front in the squad car for an hour, even though it was colder than a penguin's nose. She'd taken him three cups of coffee but he was so upset he wouldn't come inside. I asked her to go out one more time and put him on the cordless phone.

"This better be important," he said.

"It's okay, Don Earl," I said. "I've got Nate. He's in the freezer at Justice Townsend's home out here in Northfield. Just take a left off the I-75 exit and go through town. It's the big stucco on Route 27. Can't miss it. I'll be here, waiting for you."

Silence. He knew better than to ask questions at that point.

I hung up the phone and noticed the flashing message indicator. Only one message had been left that day. I pressed the button . . . it was Justice Jim Townsend's voice. "Charlotte, just finishing up some office work this morning . . . I'll be home soon. Today's the day. . . . Dress for snow."

It was late by the time I got back to the Victorian. The night was pitch black and Prudie had forgotten to leave the porch light on for me.

I shuffled beneath the shadows of the elms weighted with snow and was approaching the service porch when I noticed a bulky figure leaning against a post. He stepped down, and I recognized Boyd Price, barrel chested and wearing his trademark rumpled trench coat.

His voice was hoarse and thin. "Jan called me this afternoon. She said you asked her some questions. She said she told you some things," he said. "She shouldn't have done that." He pushed up his eyeglasses, his broad face pale beneath mussed black hair.

"I believe you'll need a good lawyer, Mr. Price," I said. "But I'm afraid I can't recommend one, so if you'll excuse me, I need to get some rest."

I tried to move past him but he grabbed my arm. "You have ruined a lot of lives tonight, Ms. Murdock, intimidating my wife—"

"Your wife, Mr. Price, unlike you, has a conscience. She doesn't take kindly to children being jerked around in Charlotte Townsend's circus of a courtroom. And neither do I."

I wrestled my arm from his grasp, walked past him, and unlocked

my door. "She said you promised not to tell," he called after me, his voice higher pitched and frightened.

"Words are cheap, Boyd. You, of all people, should know that."

I left him shivering in the night air, then walked upstairs and found the Chinese takeout Clint had left on my butternut table. I looked out from my window seat. Boyd Price was gone, another sad legal casualty who couldn't play fair.

Three consecutive, and unwelcome, thumps before sunrise; it meant she'd read Monday's *Gazette* already and left it in the mailbox on the service porch.

Feeling restless, I locked my door, dropped my keys in the left pocket of my good wool coat, jostled my purse and sack lunch, and pulled the newspaper out. Bold headlines accompanied color mug shots of the Townsends and another photograph of the sprawling stucco surrounded with crime scene tape. BODY FOUND IN FREEZER: SUPREME COURT TOWNSENDS ARRESTED.


I scanned the article and cringed at the muffled sound of my phone upstairs. Frustrated, I dug for my keys and unlocked the door, catching it on the fourth ring.

"You doin' okay?" he said.

"A little tired, but yeah, okay," I said, out of breath.

"I guess you're working today. Snow's melting pretty fast . . . umm . . . look, I don't want to scare you but the Townsends are powerful people. Watch your back now and then, you might be on somebody's hit list."

"As long as it's not yours," I told him, and found myself smiling.

Don Earl laughed, but just barely, and I could almost see the glint in his gray eyes. I tossed the *Gazette* in the trash can beside my desk and headed for school. 

Note to Our Readers:

If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

HOME DEFENSE SYSTEM

EDMUND X. DEJESUS

Ramon courteously cut the engine on his lawn mower when he saw Mr. Jordan, waving and smiling, jog down from the big house. He liked Mr. Jordan, and not just because cutting this one broad, lush lawn paid more than five ordinary lawns. This customer, even though he was obviously rich, was always nice to him.

Mr. Jordan was a big man, maybe a little overweight, and his face was pink and sweaty from the hot morning sun by the time he reached Ramon. They shook hands. Not all his customers were willing to get their own hands dirty like that.

"How's it going, Ramon?"

"Is good, Señor Jordan. And you?"

"Great, great. Listen, I'm glad I caught you. I wanted to tell you that we won't be here next week. We're leaving for vacation this afternoon. I wanted to pay you in advance." He handed Ramon a folded pile of bills.

"*Gracias*," Ramon said, ducking his head. "Where you are going?"

"We're going white-water rafting. Should be fun. And cool." He laughed and Ramon smiled.

"It sounds good. You want I should do the flower beds while you gone?"

Mr. Jordan shook his head. "No, I think you better wait for us to get back. Helen will want to show you what she has in mind."

Ramon nodded. Mrs. Jordan was not a pretty woman, but she was good to him, sometimes bringing him cool drinks on a hot day.

"You have good time, señor. I take care of everything."

"Thanks, Ramon. See you when we get back." Mr. Jordan began walking back up to the house.

Ramon started the engine again. He was thinking about that big house, unoccupied for a week. Through the large windows he had seen a beautiful wide-screen TV, and probably three hundred CDs near an expensive stereo system. And rich people like that would have insurance for everything.

Mrs. Jordan was very forgetful. Several times they had come home while he was doing the lawn, and she would have to ask Mr. Jordan for the alarm code. "Two-three-five-seven," Mr. Jordan would reply patiently each time.

Ramon looked once more at the big house, and then back at the lawn—the first of seven he had to cut today.

Two-three-five-seven, he kept repeating to himself.

Dave pulled the Jordans' mail from his bag and placed it in the wicker basket by the front door. By rights, he was supposed to leave it in the curbside mailbox, but the generous tip he received each December motivated him to make this extra effort.

Mr. Jordan stuck his head out the front door. "Hey, Dave, how's it going?"

"It's going," Dave grinned.

"Great. I wanted to let you know: I turned in that form at the post office to hold our mail, but I wasn't sure if I had to tell you too."

Dave nodded. "The form's enough, but thanks for letting me know. You folks going away?"

Jordan nodded. "Leaving tonight for a week. White-water rafting."

Dave's gaze flicked past Jordan to the interior of the house. There was an immense painting hanging in the spacious front hall, one of those paintings so weird and ugly it had to be valuable. Near it was a bronze ballet figure on a pedestal, like something he'd seen in a museum once. The whole house had stuff like that, he'd noticed through the windows on his many trips to the front door.

"Sounds fun," said Dave.

"Hope so. Well, see you later."

"Take care." Dave turned away and headed down the steps. He was remembering all the times he'd heard Jordan call out the alarm code to his wife.

Two-three-five-seven.

"Honey, I just remembered: the newspaper. Shouldn't we tell Herb?" Helen asked.

"I called the paper. They'll let him know."

"Oh good." The doorbell rang. "I'll get it."

She opened the front door. "Oh hi, Bernice," said Helen. "It's Bernice!" she called back into the house.

"Hi, Mrs. Jordan. Here's your dry cleaning, and I returned your videos. If you could just sign here?" Bernice pulled a pen out of her uniform shirt.

"Oh sure." Helen draped the dry cleaning bag over one arm, and signed Bernice's clipboard. "Bernice, we're going away for a week. For vacation."

"Hey, great. Where are you going?" Bernice noticed, not for the first time, Helen Jordan's diamond earrings and silver bracelet.

"White-water rafting. We're leaving tonight. Oh gosh, we have to get moving soon."

"Well, I'll let you go. Have fun."

"Thanks. See you when we return."

Bernice walked back to her van. Nobody going white-water rafting would bring all their jewelry with them. She would probably leave it all upstairs in their bedroom. And they were going tonight.

Two-three-five-seven, she thought to herself.

It was ten thirty that night when Herb drove up to the Jordan's home. Visions of that valuable coin collection had been dancing in his head ever since he got their one-week vacation notice from the newspaper office. "Two-three-five-seven," he recited like a mantra.

He pulled into the long curving drive, then headed for the back of the house, where the garage was. He was startled to see the automatic floodlight on. And even more startled to see Dave Kinslow whirl around in surprise as he parked.

"Hey, Dave," Herb called casually.

"That you, Herb? How you doing?" Dave raised a hand to the glare of the headlights until Herb shut them off.

"Okay." Herb paused a moment. "What's up, Dave?"

"Oh." Dave looked up at the big house as if noticing it for the first time. "The Jordans are away on vacation—"

"Nice people," Herb commented.

"The best," Dave agreed, bobbing his head. "And, you know, I just thought I'd drive by on my way home, make sure everything's okay."

"That's thoughtful."

"Well, like you said, they're nice people." Dave looked hard at Herb. "How 'bout you, Herb?"

"Oh, I got the notice that they were going to be gone for a week,

stopping their paper and everything, and then I started thinking that maybe I'd left a paper here anyway. You know, out of habit?"

"Yeah."

"So I thought I better check. Don't want a paper sitting here all week. People might think they weren't home, try to rob the place or something."

"Right. So, why'd you come around back here?"

"Well, like I said, I came to check the paper—"

"You leave one?"

"No, after all that, turns out I didn't. Just wanted to make sure. Anyway, I saw the light on back here and thought I'd check it out."

Dave nodded. "Yeah, makes sense."

"Glad it was you," Herb added. "Don't want to be messing with a burglar."

"No, you sure don't." Dave glanced up at the house once more, a little wistfully. "Well, everything seems fine here—"

"Great, I'll be heading out then."

"Yeah, me too."

Well, that was that, thought Herb, as he backed his car around in the driveway. Can't do anything now that Dave's seen me here. As if he was just checking the house. Sure.

If that isn't the worst luck, thought Dave, climbing into his car. Him getting the same idea as me. And I really think he came all the way out here to check a paper. Right.

Bernice's battered Chevy lurched into the driveway. Her mouth dropped open when she saw Dave and Herb there. She got out of her car slowly, her mind rehearsing the story she'd concocted.

"Well hey, guys! What's going on here?" she said with genuine-sounding surprise.

They both told their stories again and she just nodded. Bull, she concluded, but that blows my plan out of the water.

"That's a coincidence," she said. "Mrs. Jordan had said something about leaving some dry cleaning for me before they went, but I wasn't sure if she actually left it. I didn't have time to come back during my shift. Let me just check the back door."

She strode over to the storm door beside the garage and looked carefully inside. "She musta forgot to put it out. That's the way she is, I guess."

"Absent minded," agreed Dave.

Herb added, "Always forgetting that code—I mean, her keys."

Bernice nodded slowly. "Well, I guess I'm done here," she said, getting back in her car, just as Ramon drove up and jerked his truck to a stop.

Ramon stepped onto the driveway, swearing softly in Spanish. When he realized that all these people were not the police lying in wait for him, he swore again. They try to break in like me, he thought. Is not fair.

"*Hola*, Ramon," said Herb.

"Howdy," Dave greeted him.

"How you doing, Ramon?" Bernice called.

Ramón shyly said hello to them all, then stood there, clasping and unclasping his hands. Finally he said, "I think I forget my gloves. On the lawn of Mr. Jordan." He pointed to the dark grass beyond the range of the floodlights.

They watched as he set out across the lawn. When he was far from them, he looked around and bent over, drawing a pair of gloves from his pocket. He held them up and walked back smiling. "I find them."

The other three nodded slowly, smiling back.

"Well," said Herb.

"Gotta go," said Dave.

"See you guys," said Bernice.

"Goodbye," said Ramon.

They all got in their vehicles and drove away into the night.

"Huh," said Jordan, glancing at his rearview mirror. "Coulda sworn that was Ramon's truck going the other way."

"He's so hardworking," said Helen, turning in the passenger's seat to see.

"Great guy," he agreed.

Helen looked out the windshield, then turned to him. "Honey, I'm so sorry we had to come back."

"Helen! It was an accident. Accidents happen. I'm just glad that it was only your ankle."

"Still, we've been looking forward to this for so long. I really want you to feel that you can go back and join everyone on the raft in the morning."

"No," he shook his head vehemently. "It wouldn't be fun without you. We'll get you comfortable, then rent a movie and have some popcorn."

She smiled at him.

They parked at the house. "I'll get the bags," he said.

Helen used her new crutches to hobble to the door, ankle lifted at an awkward angle. She scrunched up her face, then shook her head. "I'm sorry, honey. What's the new alarm code again?"

"Nine-four-one-oh," he said.

BOOKED & PRINTED

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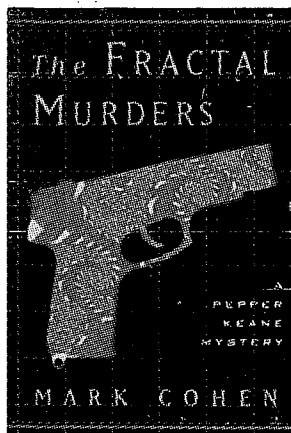
Institutions of higher learning and high caliber mysteries are a great combination, with colleges and universities providing a microcosmic setting where all the usual passions that lead to murder can be found in abundance. They are also a natural location for intellectually challenging mysteries. The type of institution can be as bustling as the Boulder campus of the University of Colorado, as august as Cambridge University, or as small (and as fictional) as Callend College in Picketsville, Virginia. These are the sites chosen for three strong debut mysteries by Mark Cohen, Christine Poulson, and Frederick Ramsay.

Mark Cohen introduces P.I. Pepper Keane in *THE FRACTAL MURDERS* (Mysterious Press, \$25). Keane is a forty-four-year-old ex-Marine and an ex-federal prosecutor, but despite his college education and law degree, he's out of his depth when math prof Jane Smyers outlines the deaths she wants him to investigate.

In a short period of time, three of Smyers's colleagues around the country have died of unnatural causes, and all three were experts in her field—fractal geometry. The odds against that happening, Smyers tells him, are astronomical. Two of the deaths were homicides; the third was written off as a suicide. The FBI had investigated perfunctorily and dismissed the case.

Cohen demonstrates many strengths in his debut novel but none more impressive than his ability to render a complex subject into easily understood terms. An example is when Smyers explains her subject area to Keane: "Fractal geometry provides a way to identify patterns where there appears to be disorder. It allows us to model and predict the behavior of complex systems. It's a language," she said. "Once you speak it, you can describe the shape of a coastline as precisely as an architect can describe a house."

Cohen does not dwell on arcane subjects such as fractal geom-



etry beyond the necessary, yet one of Pepper Keane's most appealing attributes is his curiosity and his self-study of philosophy and Eastern religions that can lead him into deep territory. Keane might wrestle with a concept of Heidegger or toss out an observation from Heisenberg, but he never seems pretentious or superior in doing it.

Keane's multi-faceted approach to finding a link between the three deaths, which are not only geographically separate but seem to have no methodological link, involves learning about fractal geometry and its applications, digging into the lives of the victims, and attempting to look at the police files on each victim.

There are distractions and complications as Keane finds himself attracted to Smyers, encounters an old nemesis who is still with the FBI, and arouses the jealous attentions of one of Smyers's colleagues. But as the hunt goes on, Keane becomes convinced that there is a connection between the deaths and that if he can figure out the connection, he can also solve the crime.

Keane lives in the small, fairly isolated mountain town of Nederland with his two dogs, Buck, a cross between a Rhodesian Ridgeback and a Great Dane, and Wheat, a schipperkee who was abused by his previous owner. He has a fondness for old rock 'n' roll music and for even older country musicians, such as Jack Guthrie, Woody's cousin, Patsy Montana, and Jim Silvers. His penchant for reading philosophy is balanced by running and weightlifting routines. Cohen not only scores with an exceptionally intelligent mystery, but in Pepper Keane he has created a memorable and distinctive sleuth whose quirks and traits are integrated into a convincing and credible whole. All in all, Pepper Keane is a welcome addition to the ranks of private investigators, and *The Fractal Murders* is a tremendously exciting debut novel.

In another debut, *MURDER IS ACADEMIC* (St. Martin's, \$23.95), Christine Poulson creates the fictional St. Etheldreda's College but nestles it comfortably and neatly into the environs of historic Cambridge University. Here amateur sleuth and Professor Cassandra James finds her placid university life suddenly thrown out of balance in several directions at once.

First comes the shocking discovery of the body of friend and colleague Margaret Joplin amid the strewn and sodden exam papers of the English Literature Department. Next, Margaret's husband requests that Cassandra act as Margaret's literary executor. Then she is appointed Acting Head of Department to replace Margaret at a time when the department's very existence is threatened. Add to all the above her own pregnancy, and the strain that is putting on her once-steady relationship with boyfriend Stephen, and her world is suddenly tilting wildly.

Margaret's death is first thought to be an accident, then suicide, and finally, frighteningly, possibly murder. Self-discovery and discoveries about friends and colleagues follow as James assumes the mantle of departmental leadership. Cambridge, with its centuries of tradition, still faces the same host of problems of any modern university. Poulson shows skill and understanding as she probes questions of academic bureaucracy, scholarship, plagiarism, student-teacher relationships, and the gamesmanship of academic life. As James learns more and more about the inner workings of the department, its faculty and students, and their private lives, she also realizes that Margaret's death may not have been the first and may not be the last. The masterful ending is not only hugely suspenseful but also highly original.

Fictitious Callend Collège in quiet Picketsville, Virginia, is the setting Frederick Ramsay creates as the starting point for his projected series featuring small town Sheriff Ike Schwartz in *ARTSCAPE* (Poisoned Pen, \$24.95). Callend College President Ruth Harris has been on the job for eighteen months and has dealt with all the myriad problems a small college president should expect. Callend's one irreplaceable asset, however, is the Dillon Collection South—a half-billion-dollar collection of paintings, statuary, and prints—stored in a special center on the campus. It is also the locus of the college's scholarly pursuits as well as its chief fund-raising attraction.

The very real threat of the collection being moved from the college is trumped when a terrorist group hires mobsters to steal the collection and hold it for ransom. The artfully planned robbery succeeds but not as smoothly as hoped. It results in a killing and the taking of hostages.

Enter Sheriff Ike Schwartz, whom Harris almost instantly detests. Schwartz is no ordinary sheriff, though. He's a former federal operative with skills and training far beyond those ordinarily needed in Picketsville. His history and abilities become clear as the story progresses.

Ramsay's detailed, complicated plot is skillfully constructed to allow the reader to appreciate both the skill and ruthlessness of the thieves and the quiet confidence that fuels Schwartz's hunt for them and their hostages. Schwartz emerges as an appealing blend of Southern charm and iron will, and his future looks as bright as the Virginia summer sun.

Aspiring writers or established ones seeking to hone their skills will welcome the revised and expanded edition of *THE ELEMENTS OF MYSTERY FICTION: WRITING THE MODERN WHODUNIT* by

William G. Tapply (*Poisoned Pen*, \$16.95). Tapply, of course, is the author of the popular Brady Coyne series as well as numerous non-fiction works.

The book's brief 196 pages are packed with detailed advice, examples, tips, and an examination of the structure of the novel from setting the hook to rewriting and revising a completed manuscript. In addition, Tapply has, as he puts it, "begged and bribed" an impressive group of friends and colleagues to address issues that have arisen or evolved since the first edition of *Elements* was published in 1995.

Philip R. Craig gives advice on preparing to write a mystery series and Bill Eidson suggests ways a stand-alone novel requires a different approach. Hallie Ephron, half of the writing team known as G. H. Ephron, writes about collaborative efforts, with particularly useful advice on formal agreements for such partnerships. Agent Fred Morris explains what an agent does, how an agent operates, and the process of finding an agent.

Barbara Peters, who owns and operates the Poisoned Pen Bookshop and with her husband Robert L. Rosenwald oversees Poisoned Pen Press, provides useful tips on what publishers both large and small look for. And who better than Mysterious Bookshop's Otto Penzler to give the bookseller's perspective on which books they buy as well as how many and why? Jeremiah Healy stresses the importance of promoting your published novel and offers good advice on how to do it.

In the concluding chapter, Vicki Stiefel talks from experience about the value of persistence. Her first novel *Body Parts* was published by Leisure Books this year after a dozen years of effort.

From start to finish, *Elements* is a concise, practical, and utilitarian guide to the process of going from would-be author to published author.



BODY ENGLISH

JOHN H. DIRCKX

It was just getting dark on a blustery, wet November evening when the door to the office of Lewis's Budget Motel banged open, admitting a gust of foggy air and a solitary traveler. The visitor stood fumbling for a moment with a worn cowhide valise and a shoulder bag and blinking in the dim light of the lobby, a nine-by-twelve space with an uneven linoleum floor. Then he approached the reception desk.

The eye of an artist would have been struck by the strong verticals in his physical composition. Jack Blake, the night clerk, saw just another tired, grouchy traveler, too down and out or too stingy to stay at a decent hotel. This traveler seemed particularly weedy and unkempt, and he had an English accent.

"Oakes," he said. He let his suitcase thump to the floor and pulled a scrap of paper from an inside pocket. "I hope you're expecting me. I booked by post almost a month ago and never received confirmation—"

"You're in number five, bud. Fill this out and sign it here and here. I need to see a driver's license and a credit card."

"My driving license is English," said Oakes. "Passport do you all right?" Taking Blake's muttered response for an affirmative, he went on, "And I expect cash in advance is acceptable in lieu of a credit card?"

His sarcastic smirk awakened no answering flicker of humor in Jack Blake's stolid features.

Late the next morning a taxi stopped outside the office of Lewis's Budget Motel and two middle-aged men climbed out of the backseat. When they had settled their account to the driver's satisfaction, he released the trunk lid from inside the cab; he had a bad back, so he stayed put while the passengers unloaded their own luggage.

Leaving most of the luggage on the ground outside, they entered the motel office. A buzzer sounded somewhere within, and immediately afterward a young woman appeared behind the reception

desk. She examined the visitors with mild curiosity. One was dressed like a clergyman and the other was stout and stodgy.

"I'm not sure there isn't some mistake here," said the stout one, with a thick British accent. "Do you have a couple of rooms reserved for Birkbeck and Thrustle?"

"Sure do," said the woman.

"We're expecting a third man. Chap named Oakes. I don't suppose he's turned up yet?"

"Sure has. Checked in last night. Number five, right between you guys."

The slighter of the two men winced at the familiar address as if she'd tweaked his ear.

They showed identification, completed forms, and paid cash in advance, flustered by the unfamiliar currency. Twenty minutes after receiving their keys and dragging their luggage around to numbers four and six, they reappeared in the office.

"Oakes didn't happen to leave any message for us, did he?" asked the bigger man. "He seems to have gone off somewhere."

**A flea-bag motel, and
a body in the closet . . .**

"He's not in his room?" She disappeared through a door behind the desk and came back immediately. "That's his rental car parked outside number five. Is the Do Not Disturb sign still on his door?" Without waiting for an answer, she picked up a telephone receiver and punched a button. They could hear the rings coming through the instrument from behind the desk. After ten of them she gave up. "He's not answering. Probably went up the street to the drug store or the post office."

"Have you seen him this morning?"

"Haven't seen him at all. The night clerk was on when he checked in."

The two men dithered a bit, left the office, reappeared in less than half an hour. "Look here," said the stouter one, "we're not satisfied that our friend isn't in his room after all. I mean, it seems a bit odd that he'd go off without leaving a message for us. He knew perfectly well we were due this morning."

She tried the phone again without success. "Any chance he had a little too much to drink last night?" she asked.

"Certainly not," the slighter man assured her. "Not Oakes."

"All right. Come on." She led them to number five, where she hammered with a formidable fist on the weathered wooden door,

making it dance in its frame but eliciting no response from within. "I hope this Mr. Oakes is a good friend of yours." She took out a passkey on a long chain. "If he's got the night bolt on . . ."

But the night bolt wasn't on. The room was dark and at first glance appeared to be deserted. Without entering, the woman reached inside and flipped the light switch, but nothing happened. By the light that filtered in from the doorway, they could see that the bulb was missing from the socket in the ceiling. The two men crowded into the room.

"Oakes. Oakes! Are you there?"

The woman trailed in after them. "There's his room key and the car keys on the nightstand," she said. "The bed hasn't been slept in. Unless he made it himself." She moved around them into the bathroom. "Bathroom light works okay, and here's the missing light bulb in the soap dish. But I don't see any of his toilet stuff on the washstand."

"I say," said the slighter man, "I don't much like the look of that." He was pointing to what was evidently a fresh stain of blood on the floor between the bed and the bathroom door.

"Let's see if his luggage is still here." The woman rolled back the sliding closet door of pleated vinyl and stepped back quickly as something heavy and inert tumbled out at her feet.

"Better not touch anything in here," she said, her teeth chattering slightly. "I'll call the police from the office."

Less than five minutes later, Patrolmen Bystrom and Dollinger arrived on the scene. With precision and efficiency, they confirmed that the victim was dead, made a preliminary examination of the body and its immediate surroundings, secured the scene, and called headquarters for instructions. The watch commander directed them to remain at the motel until relieved by investigative personnel, dispatched a homicide detective and an evidence technician to the scene, and phoned the coroner's office to report the death.

It was around eleven A.M. when Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn arrived at the motel. For once he had beaten both the evidence technician and the coroner's investigator to the scene.

Lewis's Budget Motel stood literally in the shadow of an access ramp to the interstate, which had begun killing its business about a generation ago. It was the worst kind of fleabag, consisting of twelve units in six free-standing buildings of cinder block from which most of the paint had long ago flaked away. The units were arranged in a broad curve, all facing away

from the street and toward a rear driveway.

The office occupied a separate, larger building embraced by the others and facing Panama Avenue. Bypassing the office, Auburn found unit number five for himself. A rental car was parked in the rear driveway opposite the unit, and next to the rental car was Bystrom and Dollinger's cruiser.

Dollinger was standing in the open doorway of the unit writing on a clipboard.

"Morning, Sergeant," he said. "Got a weird one here."

"Shooting death?"

"Oh yes. No doubt about that. The nonprescription pain reliever. He took two to the body."

"Any sign of a weapon?"

"Zip so far. Bystrom is still beating the bushes back there."

On the other side of the rear driveway lay a woods of several acres, actually little more than an untended thicket, littered with rubbish and traversed by paths worn in the bare earth by a steady stream of pedestrian traffic, mostly nocturnal. Beyond the woods lay Larchmere Courts, a low-income, high-crime housing development.

"Robbed?"

"No cash in his wallet, and all the stuff from his suitcase was dumped on the closet floor."

"So what's weird?"

"They crammed him in the closet too. Stood him on his head." Dollinger turned back into the room and Auburn followed him in. Even at midday on this murky autumn day, the place was shrouded in gloom despite a glow of light from the bathroom. "That ceiling light doesn't work—no bulb. There's a loose bulb in the bathroom, but we haven't touched it. Here's a flashlight."

"Thanks, Fritz, I've got mine."

Auburn swept the room quickly with his light, noting the generally grubby decor—battered furniture, discolored bedclothes, curtains ready to fall apart. A potent scent of cologne, not very masculine, mingled with the reek of stale tobacco smoke and the raw tang of mildew.

The body of a man lay crumpled on the floor, his head partly inside a shallow closet with an accordion-pleated vinyl sliding door. He wore a dark gray windbreaker over a red and gray knit wool sweater, and black slacks. Auburn guessed his age at about sixty. His face was bloated and purple as if he had been strangled, but smudges of a different shade of red showed where two bullets had hit him from in front, one near the left shoulder and one directly over the heart.

"When they slid back the door, he sort of popped out," said Dollinger. "They say he was jammed in there head down."

Auburn shone his flashlight over the jumbled clothing and personal articles on the floor of the closet without touching anything. He found no bottle of cologne, broken or otherwise. The scent was strongest around the body.

"I understand he's a foreigner?"

"English. His wallet is there on the windowsill. It was in the closet with his other stuff."

"Anything in his pockets? Or did you check yet?"

"We went ahead and checked, since he'd already been moved. Absolutely zero. Not so much as a stick of gum or a nail clipper. And no wristwatch."

Auburn picked up the wallet and carried it into the bathroom. The driving licence (so spelled) had been issued by the U.K. Driving and Vehicle Licencing Agency to Lysander Oakes. "Nothing but junk here," mused Auburn. "No credit cards, nothing to indicate his occupation or what he was up to. When did he check in?"

"About five thirty last night."

"Was he traveling alone?"

"As far as we know, but he could have gone cruising last night and picked up a barnacle. That's his rental car outside. Keys to the car are on the stand there by the room key. Anyway, the tag on the keys matches the plates on the car. We didn't touch that."

"So who found him in the closet?"

"You been in the office yet?"

"No, I came straight back here."

"The manager unlocked the door of the room with a passkey. She's there in the office. A couple of friends were supposed to meet him here this morning. They checked in and then couldn't get any answer when they knocked."

"Checked in to the motel?"

"Right. They're still around somewhere. They're English too—accents as thick as gravy—but they traveled here by way of Baltimore, or at least one of them did, and this guy had a direct flight."

"He ought to have a passport, wouldn't you think? Don't let me forget to report that to the immigration authorities if it doesn't turn up." He took another look at the dead man. "So what do you think happened here, Fritz?"

"Me and Bystrom figured maybe a trap—ambush—since they took the bulb out of the light. The robbery could be a blind. I

mean, why would an ordinary burglar stuff a chance victim upside down in a closet?"

"How'd they get in to set the trap, if Oakes wasn't here to let them in?"

"Ask this guy. That part was his idea."

"What was my idea?" asked Patrolman Bystrom, who had appeared in the doorway.

"About the ambush. You find something back there?"

"Not in the woods. I just half killed myself fishing this out of that big iron trash receptacle." He was holding a flat, black leather object by one corner. "Must have been tossed in there pretty recently. It was right on top of all the other slop."

"Is that his passport?" asked Auburn.

"It's a man's wallet. Looks like it's in too good a condition to be thrown out."

"Empty?"

"I think so. We already found the dead guy's wallet, but I figured whoever killed and robbed him could have pinched this out of another room and tossed it in there."

"Let's see it," said Auburn. "You can handle it. That rawhide finish isn't going to hold any latent prints, and anyway it's sopping wet." Auburn took the wallet back into the bathroom for an examination under the light. It was indeed empty of any identification, but folded in fourths and tucked within an interior pocket he found a ten pound note issued by the Republic of Ireland. "An English corpse in here and an Irish wallet out there? That can't be just a coincidence."

Next to the motel office there was a walkway, partly covered by an aluminum awning, where soft drink and ice machines stood rattling and rusting in the weather. The trash receptacle where Bystrom had found the empty wallet was also located there. On his way to the office, Auburn found a young woman in a denim smock unloading two plastic trash bags into it from a housekeeping cart.

"Excuse me, miss," he said. "Police officer." He showed identification. "Are those bags from room number five?"

"No, sir." Her hair was shingled, her build athletic, her manner neutral and businesslike. "They're from number twelve. The uniform guys said stay out of number five—I stayed out."

"Was it you that unlocked the room this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you have a minute, I'd like to check some facts with you."

She closed the lid of the trash receptacle and pulled off her

heavy-duty rubber gloves. "Come on in the office."

She gave her name as Becca Strachan, pronounced "strong."

"If you could let me see the registration card the man in number five filled out when he checked in . . . ?"

He verified the dead man's name and address and the registration number of his rental car. "Were you here when he checked in last night?"

"No, sir. The night clerk was here, and he's at his day job now. I can give you his name and where you can reach him."

"Can you tell me if Oakes had any phone calls or any visitors last night?"

"No phone calls. Visitors, I wouldn't know. I mean, this isn't exactly the YMCA." When she smiled, the left half of her face twisted into a wry grin that was half a wink.

"I notice your registration form includes a release of responsibility for valuables not stored in your safe. Do you have anything in the safe that belonged to Oakes?"

"No, sir."

"How many other guests have you got staying in the motel right now?"

"Right now just Laurel and Hardy—his two friends. They checked in this morning and they're already talking about checking out again."

"Where are they?"

"Probably in their rooms—four and six. Want to see their names?"

Auburn copied their names and other identifying data from the registration forms onto two three-by-five-inch file cards.

"Did these people all make reservations in advance?"

"Oh yes. Weeks ago, by mail, from England."

"Who around here would have known that Oakes would be staying here last night—besides you and the night clerk?"

"Nobody."

"Did you have any other guests last night?"

"One. This man here." She pulled a receipted invoice out of a rack and handed it to Auburn. "Mr. Schuyler is a sales rep for a car parts distributor out of Boston. Stays here four or five times a year. He was in number twelve last night. He left early this morning, probably to make some connections in town."

"Would you know how early?"

"No way of telling that. In God We Trust—everybody else pays in advance. That way guests can check out as early as they want without waking the clerk. Mr. Schuyler was gone when I got here at six. You might be able to track him down before he moves on,

if you call the home office of his company and find out what his plans were for today."

"Good thought. Thanks." Auburn started another card for Schuyler. "Had Oakes ever stayed here before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Did you see him or talk to him earlier in the day?"

"The first time I ever saw him was when he flopped feet first out of that closet, dead as a mackerel."

"Can you tell me about that?"

She did. Auburn made a few notes.

"Are you the owner of the motel?"

"My dad owns it. He's in a nursing home, arguing with little men who aren't there. I've had this place listed with a realtor for a year and a half, but she says it's like trying to unload a synagogue in Salt Lake City."

"Do you have other staff besides the night clerk?"

"Just a maid, but she only comes in on weekends unless I call her. Weekdays I'm the maid. Plus I teach night school and coach basketball."

"Sounds like you have your hands full."

"It's no picnic." She pushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes. "The kind of people who stay in a dump like this place feel free to trash the rooms and then steal the phones."

"A couple more questions. Have you had any guests recently from Ireland?"

"Not that I know of. These three are about the first people we've had from outside the country for as long as I can remember."

"Has anybody reported anything stolen lately?"

"Stolen from their room here? Not that I'm aware of."

"I'll let you get on with your work. If you could just give me that night clerk's name and address?"

"His name is Jack Blake and his address is right where we're standing. He lives in a room here back of the office. He's an old crony of my father's—he gets a free apartment in lieu of wages. During the day he works for the county. When he feels like it. I'll get you the number."

When Auburn left the office he noticed that the white van from the coroner's office was parked on Panama Avenue. Outside room number five Nick Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, was just being briefed by the uniformed officers. Before Stamaty could unsling his camera case, the evidence van from headquarters pulled into the driveway and parked beyond the patrolmen's cruiser.

Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician, sprang out and started unloading equipment as if he were a paramedic on a life-and-death mission. Actually he was just hoping to shoot pictures, dust for latent prints, and take samples of the slime in the shower before Stamaty got near the corpse. Auburn buttonholed Kestrel, told him about the light bulb, and pointed out Oakes's rental car. He also turned over the wallet Bystrom had found in the trash receiver.

Auburn got no answer when he knocked at the doors of rooms four and six. Then he became aware of two elderly figures pacing side by side at the end of the crumbling asphalt driveway, and remembered that Becca Strachan had called them Laurel and Hardy. There was something unmistakably if indefinably foreign about the cut of their clothing and even, it seemed to Auburn, in the way they walked. But the fact that they were disagreeing about something came across clearly despite their phlegmatic bearing.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said Auburn, showing identification. "Are you Mr. Oakes's friends?"

They broke off their discussion and eyed Auburn as if he had just emerged from a flying saucer. He was familiar with just about every possible reaction of the white male American citizen to the black male police officer, but these two foreigners were an unknown quantity.

"Yes, we are," conceded the stout one.

"I'm sorry to have to bother you at such a time, but I'm sure you understand that the sooner we get all our facts together, the sooner we can track down whoever killed your friend."

"Yes, well, we've already told the other chaps all we know, which is precious little." He had three chins, thinning gray hair, and a dreamy, tranquil manner that even the violent death of a friend didn't seem to have disturbed. He was puffing at an enormous curved pipe with intense application and evident relish.

In contrast, his companion, a lean, ascetic-looking man wearing black with a clerical collar, appeared to be in an advanced state of the jitters. He had a thin, straggling mustache that looked as if he gnawed it constantly, and Auburn suspected that his present condition was just an exacerbation of a chronic nervous disorder.

"If you wouldn't mind just helping me fill in some details . . . Maybe we could step inside one of your rooms. It's a little raw out here."

They chose room number four. The ceiling light was working there, but the heating system seemed to be on the blink. Maybe it wasn't even turned on, since the occupant had just arrived an hour or two ago. There was only one chair and nobody took it.

"Were you close friends of Mr. Oakes?"

"Very close," said the bigger man, who seemed to have assumed the role of spokesman. "We were all at school together, a donkey's years ago. Every autumn we get together for a bit of a lark—nothing all that sensational, mind you, at our ages."

Auburn shuffled file cards. "I already have your names, but I don't know which of you is which."

"Oh, sorry. Birkbeck, Charles. Friends call me Dick." He made the last remark in a tone that clearly forbade Auburn to attempt any such intimacy. "This is Wilbur Thrustle."

"Is it Reverend?"

The thinner man bowed a solemn acknowledgment of his clerical status but spoke not a word.

"You said you and Mr. Oakes were getting together for a—?"

"I think I said a lark. Just a friendly reunion, you know the sort of thing. We usually go somewhere a great deal closer to home—Brighton, Torquay, the Isle of Wight, the Cornish coast. But, this autumn, Wilbur was coming to the States to attend a religious conference in Baltimore at the very time when I planned on coming over for an antique motor rally in Indianapolis." He pronounced it "injernap'lis." "So Oakes suggested we do our annual outing over here."

"Was there any particular reason why you chose this motel?"

Birkbeck smiled wryly at his hands, while Reverend Thrustle cleared his throat and prepared to give tongue. "Oakes always handles the details of our excursions," he said. "Picks the route and the stops, from maps and guidebooks, and does all the booking. And the fact is that he—he—"

"Invariably botches the job," Birkbeck finished for him. He looked around the shabby room as if he were examining the interior of a stable. "This is scarcely the sort of place we had in mind when we set out. And we shall be seeking more suitable accommodations just as soon as possible."

"What can you tell me about Mr. Oakes? Does he have a family?"

"No, sir. No brothers or sisters, and he never married."

"What kind of work did he do?"

The man in black became still more restless, and even Birkbeck's placid features took on a somber cast. "He was in government service," he said. "And that's about all we know. He was some sort of agent, traveled around a great deal in earlier years. Very hush-hush, but then he's always been that sort of chap—secretive, but whimsical about it, if you see what I mean."

"What Dick is trying to say," explained Reverend Thrustle, "is

that, although we're pretty certain that Oakes had some sort of position in the civil service, we haven't a clue whether he was the public hangman or the fellow who picks the flavor of the glue they put on postage stamps." It occurred to Auburn that, despite his fussy and doddering manner, this clergyman could probably deliver a pithy sermon when the occasion demanded.

"Very well put," nodded Birkbeck. He emptied his pipe into an ashtray on the nightstand and began cleaning the bowl with a small folding tool that he took from his pocket. "And we might add that, although Oakes supposedly retired four or five years ago, we've both suspected he was still up to—whatever he'd been up to before."

Auburn was beginning to wonder if, after all, Oakes might not have been killed by a personal enemy instead of a common thief. "Are you fairly sure he didn't come to the States on government business?" he asked.

Their responses were characteristic—shrugs and inarticulate mumblings.

"He paid cash when he checked in here last evening," said Auburn. "We didn't find a credit card among his belongings. Would he have been carrying one?"

They were convinced that he would have been.

"Would he have been carrying a lot of cash too? Any valuables? Camera? Camcorder? A watch?"

"No camera," said Birkbeck. "Oakes was allergic to gadgets. But he always wore a gold wristwatch. And he certainly would have had a quantity of cash too. He told us how to go about exchanging British currency for American after we got here, and no doubt he did the same for himself."

"What were your plans, exactly? I mean, how long did you expect to stay in town?"

"Just one night here, then on to Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and back home Tuesday week."

"And you and Oakes had hotel reservations and plane tickets for the rest of the trip?"

"Yes, sir. Of course that's all off now."

Auburn thought for a moment before putting his next question. "There doesn't seem to be more than a change or two of clothing among the articles in Oakes's room. Did he have more than one piece of luggage?"

"As to that," replied the minister, "we can only surmise. But if I know Oakes, he was probably carrying everything from tinned beef to mosquito netting."

"Well, we haven't opened the trunk of the car he rented at the airport yet. Maybe we'll find more luggage there. Meanwhile, does this wallet look familiar to either of you? Might it have belonged to Oakes?"

They both shook their heads. "Not familiar, no," said Birkbeck, "but we don't keep in such close touch these days. We can't say it isn't his."

"If it was, would he have been carrying any Irish money?"

"Irish money? He might have been if he was going to Ireland, but hardly on a trip to the States."

Reverend Thrustle was squirming uneasily. "When you say *Irish* money," he said, "do you mean punts or euros?"

"Punts, I suppose."

"Well, but you see, punts are no longer legal tender in Ireland, or anywhere else," Birkbeck took up the thread again. "I don't know just how well you understand our political situation. Ireland is an independent country—to be particular, fiercely independent of the British Crown. And just to do Her Majesty's Treasury one in the eye, Ireland went along with eleven other European countries in adopting the euro as an international monetary unit, even though England retained the pound sterling. That was in 2002. Since then, the punt is obsolete. You can't spend it anywhere. And you can't spend euros in England, or English pounds in Ireland."

Auburn paused to digest this. The case was gradually assuming features that threatened to complicate his immediate future enormously. "Do you think Oakes might have been in Ireland recently?"

"I suppose it's possible. But we've no reason to believe so."

"I understand the last time you saw him alive was back home in England?"

"That's correct, sir," said Thrustle. "About a couple of weeks ago."

"Do you know what route he was planning to follow to get here?"

In answer, Birkbeck unstrapped a briefcase that lay on the bed and produced a folder containing a computer printout of five pages, liberally annotated in black and red ink, and accompanied by loose papers, including airline ticket stubs. "Here's his itinerary," he said, "as well as our own. You'll understand that some of the notes are a bit private."

Here was more than Auburn could have hoped for in the way of documentary evidence as to where Birkbeck and Thrustle had been at the time Oakes was murdered. He recorded the essentials of Oakes's route and returned the papers to Birkbeck.

After thanking them for their cooperation and asking them to

keep him informed as to their whereabouts if they decided to check out of the motel, he suggested that they talk to Stamaty, the coroner's investigator, before he left the scene, so as to discuss legal formalities regarding repatriation of Oakes's remains.

When he went back outside he learned that Kestrel had opened the rented car and found nothing but the rental papers and a few food wrappers and soft drink containers. The trunk of the car was empty. Oakes had rented the car at the airport and used a credit card, which was still missing. His passport was also still missing.

"Have you checked out the door and the windows of the room to see if they might have been forced?" Auburn asked Kestrel.

"Not yet, not yet." A perfectionist and a workaholic, Kestrel typically received suggestions from colleagues with about as much composure as a surgeon who is being advised by the patient where to cut and how deep.

Auburn went to his car and called Boston on his cell phone. His respect for Becca Strachan went up a notch when he found that the home office of Carrigan Automotive Specialities, Ltd., did indeed have Bennett Schuyler's schedule of sales visits for the day. He glanced at the dashboard clock, which read twelve twenty-five, and made a mental calculation in which the growing awareness of his empty stomach figured to no small degree.

On the way to Massey's Custom World on Hanover Road, he snatched a quick lunch in the drive-through lane at Beanie's Burger-Master: two Junior Beef Explosions (which he knew from prior experience contained no MSG, sodium nitrite, or cilantro), fries, and coffee.

He didn't call ahead to Massey's because he didn't want Schuyler to be forewarned of his coming. That perhaps accounted for the stuffy reception he got there when he identified himself to the owner-manager. Such establishments are more or less permanently under suspicion of converting or customizing stolen automobiles so as to make them unrecognizable even to their rightful owners. For that matter, sales reps who cross state lines are more or less permanently under suspicion of transporting drugs, assault weapons, dirty money, or other contraband.

Schuyler, he learned, hadn't been there yet but was expected sometime that afternoon. Auburn took a seat in the waiting room and looked over his notes, meanwhile struggling to ignore the soap opera on the TV and the din of banging and sanding from the garage on the other side of the wall. As he looked back on the interview with Oakes's friends, he couldn't help feeling that there was something odd about their manner that neither cultural dif-

ferences nor the shock of finding their friend murdered could quite explain.

He kept one eye on the parking lot, watching for a car with Schuyler's Massachusetts registration number. When, about a half hour later, Schuyler arrived, Auburn was standing next to his car before he was all the way out of it.

"Excuse me—Mr. Schuyler?"

Schuyler looked up from the chore of loading a laptop computer like a cafeteria tray with pasteboard-parts boxes and cans of paint and wax. "Yes, sir," he said with the brisk cheeriness of the congenital salesman. He was about forty-five, chunky, bald on top. The backseat of the car was stacked with cartons of merchandise. Some fishing tackle was there as well, and the rear window bore the logo of a bass anglers' association.

"Police officer, sir. Can I help you there?"

"If you could just hold the door . . . thanks." Schuyler fumbled a pair of glasses onto his nose and peered at Auburn's identification. "Caught me with my bifocals down. What did I do, run a stop sign?"

"Just a routine investigation, sir. I won't hold you up long. We could step on inside."

They went to the waiting room, where Schuyler put down his burden on a counter and exchanged greetings with Massey. Massey withdrew to what he probably thought was a discreet distance but stood watching them intently.

Schuyler sank into one of the stained and worn chairs as if he were in his own living room. From a pocket case he extracted a business card and handed it to Auburn—a flashy embossed card in four colors that identified him as Bennett "Sky" Schuyler. "Just so we're sure you've got the right crook," he said.

"This is strictly a routine inquiry," Auburn assured him again. "I believe you stayed at Lewis's Budget Motel on Panama Avenue last night?"

"Sure did."

"About what time did you leave this morning?"

"Oh, I was out of there by six, quarter after. There's no place around there where you can get a decent breakfast, and I had a lot of stops to make today. Still do. Keeping ahead in this business is a matter of mind over mattress. You snooze, you lose." He squirmed and settled himself deeper in his seat, like a man getting ready for a long poker game. "So what did I do—walk out of there with one of their towels?"

"Did you see or talk to any of the other guests while you were at the motel?"

Schuyler rubbed his ample chin as an aid to reflection. "I don't think there were any other guests," he said. "Only person I talked to was One-Eyed Jack, the night clerk, who was in his usual buoyant and charming mood."

"Did you see or hear anything unusual going on during the night?"

"Not exactly unusual for that place. Around nine o'clock, while I was calling home, some kids were out on the sidewalk throwing stones at a blind dog, trying to make it run out in the traffic. By the time I went out to see what was up, somebody stopped and got out of a car and the kids disappeared into the woods. After I went to bed a couple guys were outside somewhere arguing in Spanish or Arabic or whatever for half an hour, about why they couldn't get their motorcycle started, I guess. And after that a bunch of drunken yahoos held a party back in the woods."

"Do you think any of those yahoos might have got into one of the motel rooms?"

"I wouldn't think so. What was it, vandalism?"

"Does the name Lysander Oakes mean anything to you?"

"No, sir. Sounds like a nice place, though."

Massey was pacing a stripe in the tile floor and eyeing Auburn the way a headwaiter eyes a diner who lingers too long over dessert.

"Did you hear anything that sounded like gunshots during the night?"

"Is that what it was, a shooting?"

"The man in room five was found dead late this morning. Did you hear any shots?"

"I'm sure I didn't," Schuyler sat forward in his chair, thoughtful and restrained. "You just put an eel in my creel, though. I've thought before maybe I should stay someplace else," he said. "But Lewis's is handy to the interstate and the price is right. I don't need a swimming pool and original art on the walls, I just need a place to sleep. Plus I carry earplugs."

"Did you have them in last night?"

"After the party started in the woods I did."

Auburn left one of his cards with Schuyler and headed downtown to the Bostwick Tower, an office building of which some part or other was forever being remodeled for new tenants who never seemed to stay out their leases. The Enforcement Department of the County Bureau of Support was housed there temporarily, pending completion of new quarters in a county administration building whose blueprints were growing yellow with age.

The accommodations on the fourteenth floor of the Bostwick Tower looked very temporary indeed to Auburn as he got off the elevator. A big open space had been divided into cubicles with rough timber partitions covered with what looked like second-hand carpet. Plastic runners crisscrossed the gritty floor, which bore traces of carpet adhesive and might well have been the former site of the fabric on the partitions. Banks of fluorescent tubes glared on windows that were bare of blinds or curtains. Auburn followed handwritten signs to the cubicle of Jack Blake.

The man at the desk was staring at the screen of a computer with a look of savage loathing. Stacks of manila folders and the remains of lunch—in fact, of many lunches and coffee breaks—were strewn over the desk and a couple of folding tables.

“Mr. Blake?”

The look of loathing was transferred to Auburn, who noticed that Blake had an artificial eye and remembered that Schuyler had called him “One-Eyed Jack.” Although probably over sixty, he reminded Auburn of a professional wrestler, with his bulging biceps, lumpy jaw, and shaven scalp. The pouched eyelids probably came from working two jobs.

Auburn showed identification and moved into the cubicle. Blake immediately blanked his monitor screen, possibly to conceal the fact that he had been playing solitaire on the taxpayers’ time. “Did you check in downstairs?” he asked.

“No, sir. This is just—”

“You need to check in first at the desk, one floor below here. They’ll assign you a number—”

“Police officer, sir,” said Auburn louder than he’d meant to. “Are you Stewart Blake?”

“Yes I am, and I’m telling you I’m not a case worker. All I do—”

“Mr. Blake, I need to ask you some questions that don’t have anything to do with your work here, okay? It’s about the motel.”

Blake lounged back in his swivel chair and let the thought sink in that he was going to have to submit to this interruption whether he liked it or not.

“Okay, okay. But I hope it’s not going to take too long. We’re about four months behind schedule here.”

“I know the sensation,” said Auburn as he got out a file card and a pen. “I believe you were on duty at Lewis’s Budget Motel last evening when a gentleman named Oakes checked in—traveler from England?”

“That’s correct. Paid cash for two nights in advance.” Amid the maze of partitions around them phones rang, people chattered

nonstop, and a radio blared fusion jazz. The place was stuffy with steam heat, and a complex aroma compounded of hummus, tobacco smoke, and almost certainly beer fumes floated on the frowzy air.

"Would you know if he had any visitors last night?"

Blake looked blank, something that seemed to come naturally to him. "If he did, I didn't see them. He went away right after he checked in, and I couldn't tell you when he came back. If he ever did. I mean, I sleep when I can, you know? For all I know, he could have had a rock band in for tea."

"When you say he went away—"

"Drove away in a rental. Did he come back?"

"Were you aware of any disturbances in the area last night—any noise, fights, gunshots?"

"There's always disturbances in that area. We're right on top of Larchmere, where anything goes. Nobody ever sleeps over there, and sometimes the action spills into the woods behind the motel. Gunshots I didn't hear, but with the interstate about twenty yards away, I might not hear artillery fire. Who got shot? Mr. Oakes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is he dead?"

"Yes, sir. And robbed."

Blake swore violently. "What did they get off him? I told that son of a buck to put any valuables he had in the safe, like I tell everybody. The night bolts on those doors wouldn't stop a stray dog."

"Have you had other robberies?"

"All the time. Like I said, when those banditos over at Larchmere get tired of stealing each other's CD players and booze, they drift on over through the woods."

"But you're not aware of anybody from outside having been at the motel last night?"

"No, sir." Blake's phone rang. He got rid of the caller swiftly with cryptic remarks that Auburn guessed referred to himself.

"How long have you worked at the motel?"

"Too long." Blake twisted his craggy face into a pile of rocks. "I worked part-time for Lew Strachan twenty years ago, back when the place filled up every night. Now I live there, back of the office. See, Lew got sick, and his daughter's sort of stuck with the place. Can't sell it, can't make it pay. I guess you talked to her? Becca?"

"You had another guest last night."

"Schuyler," nodded Blake. "Rep for a car parts outfit up in Boston. Did they hit him too?"

"Apparently not. He says he heard some men arguing outside last night. About a motorcycle?"

"Could be. I didn't hear it, but like I said, the neighborhood isn't exactly a haven of tranquillity. You probably wouldn't notice if somebody was rolling dice in a bowling alley, either."

On returning to headquarters, Auburn found that Birkbeck had called to leave word that he and Reverend Thrustle had moved to the Hotel Charleroi and would probably be leaving town within twenty-four hours unless directed otherwise. After reporting briefly to his superior, Lieutenant Savage, Auburn ordered routine background probes on Becca Strachan, Jack Blake, and Bennett Schuyler, then drafted and dispatched an official communication to the Metropolitan Police in London requesting information on Oakes, Birkbeck, and Thrustle.

Then, following Savage's advice, he used a countywide computer network to ask banks and other financial institutions to establish and record the identity of any person seeking to exchange English or Irish money. He also alerted Lieutenant Dunbar in Robbery to the fact that money and a watch had probably been stolen from Oakes. Finally, he got in touch with the immigration authorities to report that Oakes's passport had also been stolen.

In the morning he found sheaves of reports heaped roughly in his IN tray. Domestic law enforcement and security agencies had no record of criminal convictions for Stewart Blake, Bennett Schuyler, or Becca Strachan. On the other hand, all three of them had appalling credit ratings, and Strachan's lawyers had already filed for bankruptcy. Stewart "Jack" Blake had a long history of county employment, having begun as a process server and worked up through court bailiff and project assistant (whatever that might be) to a position with the Bureau of Support. He had been compelled to take an early retirement during a reduction in force, but had been immediately rehired by a temporary employment agency to do essentially his former job. Becca Strachan taught biology and health science and coached golf and women's basketball at Auburn's alma mater, John Mellon High School. Schuyler, in spite of personal financial embarrassments, was an honorary trustee of a credit union.

There was also abundant information from the English police. The late Lysander Oakes had been called to the bar in 1964, but instead of practicing law had entered government service. The nature of this service was unspecified, and the English authorities made it clear that wild horses would not drag any more information from them. Oakes had been retired for seven years because

of a lung disorder, also unspecified. If he'd still been taking on the odd diplomatic assignment, his employers weren't admitting it.

Charles D. Birkbeck was a retired physician, a decorated Vietnam veteran, and a collector and exhibitor of antique cars. Wilbur Thrustle, D.D., was an ordained minister in the Church of England, an honorary canon of Westminster (Auburn promised himself to delve into that at his earliest opportunity), and pastor of a parish in the London suburb of Chislehurst. He had been representing his bishop at an international church council in Baltimore during the preceding week. Neither Birkbeck nor Thrustle had had any brushes with the law.

Stamaty at the coroner's office had sent a preliminary autopsy report, which showed that death had been due to a .38 caliber slug that had penetrated the heart. A second bullet wound had torn the left lung without inflicting lethal damage. Both shots had been fired from a distance of at least two feet. The dead man's heart hadn't been in very good shape in the first place, and in addition he had probably been a drinker.

Sergeant Kestrel had submitted a report on his findings in and around the death scene. His meticulous tabulation of more than a hundred species of dirt might be a masterpiece of scientific investigation, but it didn't look like anything that was going to help nail the killer.

Since Auburn saw no mention in the report of the wallet that Bystrom had dug out of the trash receptacle, he called the lab to query Kestrel.

"Provisionally, I'm assuming that wallet is irrelevant to the case," Kestrel told him. "There aren't any fingerprints or human material on it, and nothing distinctive that you could use to trace the owner or tie it up with the homicide—just the usual fibers and detritus." Kestrel loved words like *detritus*. "You didn't pick up any gloves anywhere, did you?"

"Gloves? What kind of gloves?"

"The kind you wear on your hands. I don't know if you noticed it in my report, but I didn't find any of Oakes's fingerprints in the car. Just some latent partial prints I can't match."

Auburn hadn't noticed it, but he wasn't going to say so. "Did you put them through the FBI system yet?"

"Not yet. They're running on about a half-day delay."

"Have you still got that wallet?"

"It's in the evidence room by now. With the Irish money still in it."

Auburn still couldn't escape the feeling that the wallet somehow had a bearing on Oakes's murder. He went upstairs, signed it

out, and took it back to his office. The money hidden in it had apparently escaped the attention of whoever had thrown it away. Maybe it still held other secrets.

He turned on a high-intensity lamp and went over the wallet with a magnifying glass. It was a high-quality article, made of stitched goatskin dyed black, with the rough side outward. It had seen considerable service but, as Bystrom had observed, wasn't ready yet for the trash.

Clear plastic sleeves, now empty, bore tantalizingly slender traces of ink from ID or membership cards. Lint from garments, no doubt duly catalogued in Kestrel's report, nestled in inner folds and crevices. Auburn's only discovery of note was the impression of a key in the soft imitation leather lining of the pocket where the money had been stashed.

Like most seasoned detectives, he knew something about locksmithing. Although the imprint of the key in the lining of the wallet might not have been clear enough to make an accurate copy of the key, it did at least show that the key fitted a pin-tumbler lock with seven pins. That suggested a large apartment building or office complex. Presumably the key was now in the possession of whoever had discarded the wallet.

Auburn was still probing and peering into the recesses of the wallet when the phone rang. The dispatcher had a call for him from a teller at the north branch of the Foundation Federal Savings and Loan. His heart started racing as he grabbed a notepad but, to his disappointment, the caller hadn't been approached by someone trying to exchange English or Irish money. Instead, she wanted to report that, around four thirty P.M. the day before yesterday, she had handed over more than two thousand dollars in cash to Lysander Oakes, in exchange for the equivalent sum in pounds sterling, plus an exchange fee.

No, Oakes hadn't submitted any euros, or punts, only Bank of England notes. Auburn recorded her name and the exact number of twenties and fifties she'd issued to Oakes.

Routine chores occupied the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon. It was after four o'clock when he finally met with Lieutenant Savage to discuss the case.

The austerity of Savage's office was proverbial. They sat at a table as stark as a butcher's block on chairs as hard as monastery benches while Auburn spelled out the salient facts. "This could have been just a casual burglary that went wrong," he conceded. "Oakes had a couple thousand dollars in cash on him when he left the bank. He could have been followed from there. Or some joker

might have slipped over from Larchmere looking for cash to feed a drug habit or maybe found a new religion."

"Any tool marks on the door or window?"

"Kestrel says not. But a credit card or a nail file would probably get you in, and the lock hardware is so beat up and wobbly that you might not even be able to tell if the door had been jimmied."

"I get the idea that you don't see this as just burglary with homicide?"

"Too many things don't fit. Taking out that light bulb could have been part of a burglar's M.O. But why did the killer steal Oakes's passport? And stand him on his head in the closet? And why did somebody throw away a perfectly good wallet with obsolete Irish money in it?"

"Don't you think the owner of that wallet probably stashed that money as a reserve, maybe years ago, just in case he got in a pinch?"

"Sure I do, just like he carried a spare key to his apartment there. But why Irish money? This Oakes was some kind of government agent—supposedly retired, but his friends think maybe he was still in harness. His so-called vacation trip to the States could have been a cover for an assignment. Or maybe he locked horns in the past with the IRA, and they sent one of their agents over here after him, figuring it would be a smooth move to liquidate him—"

Auburn broke off in the middle of a sentence, having suddenly realized that the most significant finding in that wallet had been right under his nose all the time. "Can I use your phone?" he asked Savage.

"Sure. What's up?"

"Cologne." Auburn was already punching buttons to call the motel. "That wallet was dripping with it. So was the body in the motel room. But there wasn't any cologne among Oakes's—Hi, Mr. Blake, this is Detective Auburn. We talked yesterday about the Oakes homicide. Can you tell me if either one of Oakes's friends, Birkbeck or Thrustle, got any phone calls while they were checked in there?"

"Hang on," said Blake's gravelly, grudging voice. "Those bills are in the back already." After three or four minutes he came back on the line. "Mr. Birkbeck got a local call at two twenty P.M. yesterday."

"Can you give me the number?"

Blake did so.

"And what time did they check out?"

"Two thirty."

Without putting down the receiver, Auburn called an informa-

tion channel and learned that the call received by Birkbeck had come from one of four pay phones in the lobby of the Hotel Charleroi. From the same channel, he obtained the number of the office at the Charleroi.

He dialed the hotel office and without identifying himself asked to talk to the manager on duty.

"Speaking. How can I help you?"

"Hi, sir! This is Eddie Grant with Wayfarer Tours. I'm trying to track down a guest who might have arrived there yesterday or the day before—a man traveling by himself, with an Irish or English accent, who probably turned up minus some personal articles—"

"Yes, sir. That would be Mr. Coyne. Some of his luggage got misdirected at Kennedy. We were able to fix him up with— Who did you say was calling?"

Auburn hung up.

Savage was peering at him with a waggish expression. "Okay," he said, "now how about putting me in the picture . . . Eddie?"

When Auburn finished laying out his theory for Savage, the lieutenant no longer looked waggish. "Whether or not you're right," he said, "I'd like to point out that you neglected a very basic formality yesterday." His air of gentle mockery didn't entirely cancel the tone of reproof.

"Correction, sir," said Auburn. "Stamaty neglected a very basic formality yesterday. And in the circumstances, it might not have made any difference."

"Granted. Now who do we call—the FBI or the CIA?"

Despite the feverish activity that ensued, it was after six o'clock when Auburn knocked at the door of a room on the ninth floor of the Hotel Charleroi.

"Who is it, please?"

"Room service, Mr. Coyne."

After a considerable delay, the door was opened by a lanky man with a long straight nose and an unruly mop of graying hair. He was in his shirtsleeves, and appeared to be slightly out of breath, as if he had been interrupted while doing an aerobic workout.

"Mr. Coyne?" Auburn moved into the room swiftly, before the occupant of the room had had a chance to notice Dollinger in uniform behind him.

"Yes, but—" The man's slightly distraught manner became one of acute alarm as Dollinger entered and closed the door.

"Take it easy, sir," said Auburn. "This is just a routine police investigation." The room was larger and far more luxuriously furnished than anything Lewis's Budget Motel had to offer. An

opened bottle of beer stood on a round table near the window. Auburn walked across the deep pile carpet to the window and glanced briefly out at the twilight cityscape. Shifting the curtain slightly, he discovered two more opened bottles of beer on the windowsill.

With a wink at Dollinger, he moved back across the room and knocked at the closed bathroom door. "Okay, gentlemen; you can come on out now. Reverend Thrustle? Doctor?"

It was quite dark by the time Auburn and Dollinger arrived at Lewis's Budget Motel. When they opened the door to the office a buzzer sounded in the back, and Jack Blake appeared almost at once. He acted about as cordial as a wild boar with a migraine.

"Please keep your hands in sight, Mr. Blake," said Auburn. "We have a warrant to search these premises."

Blake slumped to a stool behind the counter. "I don't own this place," he objected, his voice hoarse and distant. "I just live here."

"I've already served the warrant on Ms. Strachan. She's waiting outside."

"What's this all about? What are you looking for?"

"The man who died here the night before last was killed by a slug from a .38. When you worked as a process server, you had a permit to carry a .38. Where is it now?"

"I lost that piece probably fifteen years ago."

"You never reported that."

The front door banged open, admitting a blast of foggy air and a solitary guest. The visitor stood fumbling with a worn cowhide valise and a shoulder bag and blinking in the dim light of the lobby before approaching the reception desk. The eye of an artist would have been struck by the strong verticals in his physical composition.

Jack Blake sat immobile, as if turned to stone, his solitary eye bulging in disbelief, his breath coming in labored wheezes.

"Oakes," said the traveler. "I say, are you feeling quite well? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Blake pointed a shaking finger at the newcomer and addressed Auburn. "You said the man who died here the other night. Didn't—isn't—"

"Mr. Oakes is here to identify any of his property that turns up during our search," said Auburn. "You remember him—you signed him into room number five a couple of nights ago. The man who died in that room later that night wasn't Oakes—he was an oper-

ative working for the Irish Republican Army named Liam Coyne. Does that name mean anything to you?"

Blake was still staring at Oakes, who had taken a seat in the lobby and now appeared to be absorbed in a golfing magazine. "No, no, I never heard of anybody named Coyne."

"Then why were your fingerprints on the plastic sleeves inside his wallet?"

Blake froze, sensing a trap. "I found a wallet out on the ground one day this week," he said slowly, as if feeling his way. "It was empty, so I threw it out."

"You mean it was empty when you threw it out. Almost empty, anyway."

Dollinger lifted the flap in the counter and he and Auburn moved past Blake into the rear part of the building. The room they came to first combined features of a business office, a laundry, and a linen room. A wheeled housekeeping cart, a stepladder, vacuum cleaners, mops, and buckets were lined up in front of an uncurtained window. A time-scarred wooden desk lay buried under a disorderly mass of papers. Stacks of dingy sheets and towels stood on steel shelves next to the washer and dryer. Cartons of cheap soap, rolls of toilet paper, and plastic trash bags were arranged haphazardly on two filing cabinets, the windowsill, and the floor.

Behind this room were Blake's living quarters—a bed-sitting room with a rudimentary kitchen tucked into an alcove. By the time Auburn and Dollinger got there, Blake was at their heels. "What makes you think I pinched any of this guy's stuff?" he asked.

Dollinger began opening bureau drawers one by one and examining their contents with practiced hands and eyes.

"When Mr. Oakes paid cash in advance for his room," said Auburn, "you saw that he was carrying a wad of large bills."

"So? I've seen wads of cash before."

"Maybe you felt more secure financially before. Your current position with the county is officially listed as temporary. And last week Ms. Strachan filed for bankruptcy." He pointed to a flat storage trunk that Dollinger had just hauled out from under the bed. "Where's the key to that?"

Blake threw a panicky glance in the direction of the door, which lay beyond Dollinger's broad back. "Look, you guys, there's private stuff in there. Some things I picked up here and there over the years . . ."

"You can explain all about that after we get it open. Got that key?"

Among many other fascinating treasures they found a leather cigar case and a gold lighter belonging to Oakes, Liam Coyne's wristwatch with his name and an inscription in Gaelic engraved on the back, a passkey that matched the impression in Coyne's discarded wallet, and large sums in both euros and U.S. currency. Blake's long-lost revolver also came to light, recently fired and with two chambers empty.

Auburn didn't take Dollinger with him when, after ten o'clock that night, he returned to Lewis's Budget Motel. He found Becca Strachan out in the cold wind on a stepladder replacing a light bulb in the NO VACANCY sign.

"I don't think this thing's been turned on more than three or four times in the past ten years," she said.

Auburn helped her carry the ladder back to the room behind the office. "Did you point Mr. Oakes back in the direction of his hotel?" he asked.

"Sure did. I even called him a cab." She took off her jacket and draped it over the desk chair. "Well, farewell, motel," she said. "We gave it our best, didn't we?"

Noticing that her eyes were wet, Auburn turned away. "You're not even going to try to hold out until the bankruptcy hearing?"

"Hey, are you kidding? You just arrested my night clerk. I wouldn't spend a night by myself in this Castle Dracula on a bet. Jack is in jail, isn't he?"

"Jack's in jail. Couldn't make bail. Before the lawyer showed up, he practically confessed to homicide."

"I still can't get over this. I've known Jack all my life. I never figured he was a saint, but to shoot a motel guest for a roll of cash!"

"It wasn't exactly like that. And the man he shot wasn't a guest."

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure, thanks."

"It's only instant, but Jack lived on the stuff. There's enough here to keep an army awake for a year." She threaded her way among the paraphernalia strewn around Castle Dracula, filling a kettle with water and digging up a pair of clean Styrofoam cups. "I still don't understand what did happen."

"Well, apparently Oakes went out again right after he checked in—to see the sights, he says. He'd made the mistake of flashing a wad of bills in front of Blake, who was probably going to lose his job with the county in a few weeks, and who knew you were getting ready to close the motel. As soon as Oakes left, Blake let himself into room number five to see if he'd stashed any of his cash there."

They took their coffee into the lobby, which didn't look quite so shabby with most of the lights off.

"For a guy who never spent a day in jail, Blake seems to have had a pretty good working knowledge of the burglary business. He wore a pair of housekeeping gloves so as not to leave any fingerprints. He took along a revolver as life insurance. He opened the bathroom window to leave himself an escape route, and he took the bulb out of the ceiling lamp so that if Oakes came back too soon he wouldn't see who was poking around under the mattress.

"But it wasn't Oakes who walked in on him; it was Liam Coyne—and Coyne came through the window and blocked his escape route. Blake panicked and shot him to death. Of course, he thought it was Oakes that he'd killed. The light was out, and Jack has only one eye. He grabbed the wallet and wristwatch off the body, snatched some odds and ends from Oakes's luggage, shut the window, locked the door, and went to bed."

Becca Strachan stood at the window, looking out at the late night traffic streaming onto the interstate from the Panama Avenue access ramp. "When I was just a kid," she said, "a woman killed herself with sleeping pills in number two. And one time a baby was born in number six. But as far as I know this is our first murder. Who was this Liam Coyne, and what was he doing coming through the window?"

"Coyne was an agent working for the Irish Republican Army, and Oakes has some kind of job in the British civil service. Apparently Coyne tracked him over here and was planning to lie in wait for him in his room. Maybe they had a rendezvous planned—maybe they're both double agents. Figuring that out isn't my problem.

"When Oakes got back that night, he found Coyne shot to death on the floor of his room. Even with the bulb missing from the ceiling light, he knew right away who it was. He says he assumed the whole thing was a frame-up engineered by his political enemies. He decided to make himself scarce, but he admits the way he went about it probably wasn't the wisest. Maybe he's seen too many James Bond movies, I don't know. Anyway, he switched identities with Coyne.

"Blake had already taken Coyne's wallet. Oakes put his own wallet on the body, leaving some identification papers in it but keeping his credit card and all his money. He also took Coyne's passport. Then he headed downtown on foot with some toilet

articles and other essentials in his traveling bag until he came to the Hotel Charleroi, where he registered as Coyne."

"Did Oakes and Coyne look that much alike?"

"They were roughly the same age and build. Hardly anybody but a cop studies pictures on IDs very carefully. That's how so many minors get beer and cigarettes."

"And it was Oakes who stuffed Coyne in the closet upside down?"

"Sure. He figured it would be several hours before the body was found, and that in that position the face would swell up enough to keep anybody here at the motel from realizing it wasn't the same guy who checked into the room the night before."

"Isn't that against the law? Doing something like that to a dead body?"

"It certainly is. But we've had word from our State Department that unless we can make a felony charge stick against Oakes we shouldn't do anything to prevent his swift departure from these shores."

She came away from the window. The mist had turned to rain, which a gusting wind sent pelting against the windows facing Panama Avenue.

"Surely," she said, "his friends must have known it wasn't Oakes who popped out of the closet."

"Of course they did. But they thought Oakes had killed the other guy, probably in self-defense, so they tentatively went along with the switch of identity. My lieutenant raked me over the coals this afternoon for not getting them to make a formal identification of the body. But I think they would have bluffed it out—at least the fat one would have. The thin one, the minister, keeps telling us he was completely against the whole thing right from the start."

"So how did you figure out that the body was Coyne instead of Oakes?"

"Fingerprints, eventually—once we decided to run them by the FBI."

"But what made you think the body might not be Oakes?"

"That's a long story."

"Like I said, there's a lot of coffee here."

The NO VACANCY sign glowed on through the rain and swirling fog. ♫

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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The Higher You Go . . .

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

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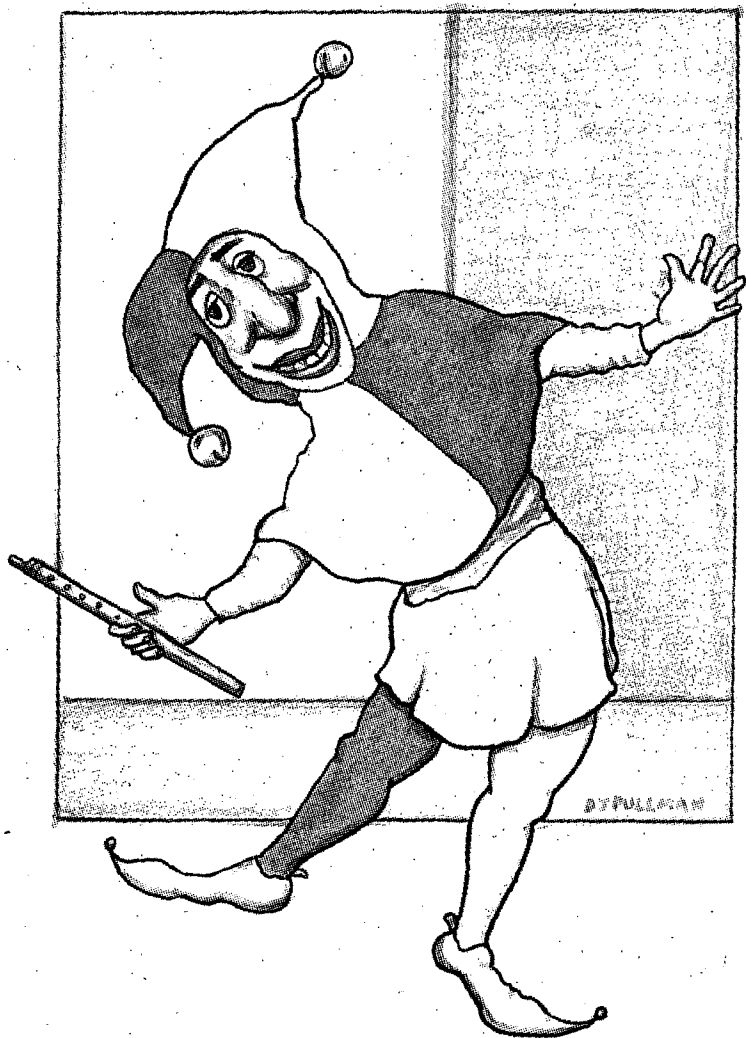
THE JESTER AND THE THIEVES

ALAN GORDON

I was Chief Fool of Constantinople for about a year. It sounds contradictory, imposing a hierarchy on creatures whose nature tends to the anarchic, but we of the Fools' Guild have long mastered living with paradox. Father Gerald used to say during training that organizing jesters is only slightly easier than herding cats. To prove his point, he had us herd cats one day, an annual exercise that always amused the local villagers. At the end, scratched, bitten, exhausted, and humiliated, we came back to the Guildhall to find him standing on the steps. He ordered us back inside for another lecture. We rebelled—I was a leader, I confess it—and sat there, chanting the rudest things we could conjure involving our teacher. He watched us, stone faced, until we ran out of breath. When one of us attempted to reason that we had demonstrated that we were more chaotic than our feline foes, Father Gerald merely observed that our rebellion showed a remarkable amount of unity and organization. Then he turned and went inside. We sat there, our collective jaws dropping, as we realized how he had manipulated us.

I became Chief Fool more by default than merit. The Guild had sent me to Constantinople to investigate the disappearance of the city's fools. I have recounted elsewhere what transpired upon my arrival, but I ended up staying on through the beginnings of the Fourth Crusade until my expulsion in August of 1203. My title might have been more impressive had there been other fools to boss around, but the only other Guild member present at my ascension was my wife and apprentice, Aglaia, compared to whom a herd of cats would seem like sheep.

Other fools joined us eventually, but this tale is from that period when just my wife and myself ran around that vast city, performing for audiences great and small, high and low. It began



with a summons by Father Esaias.

"What does that black-hearted, black-cowled, blackguard want?" wondered my wife, worriedly.

"Just the favor of my company," I replied, handing her the message.

"You alone," she said, reading it. "That means he wants you to do something that I wouldn't let you do if I was there."

"Now, that's intriguing," I said. "I will see you later. I am having dinner with the Devil."

"There is no spoon long enough," she muttered as I left.

Father Esaias ran the underworld of Constantinople from a sumptuous set of rooms inside the crypts of St. Stephen's by the River, a church on the west bank of the Lycos in the middle of the city. He had a hideously scarred face that few had seen once, none had seen twice, and most were happy never to have seen at all. I counted myself among the few.

We had formed a temporary alliance based on an unexpected convergence of interests on one particular intrigue, but that arrangement continued afterwards. While the goals of the Fools' Guild are anything but criminal, our methods are not always so sacrosanct. Father Esaias had resources that we lacked, and my wife and I had drawn upon them on more than one occasion.

Our payment to date had been information. Aglaia and I were frequent visitors at the Imperial Palace, and privy to the internal machinations of the court as well as the general gossip. We passed on such items as we thought we safely could to the good Father, and had otherwise not been called upon to do anything more than provide entertainment at the raucous midnight feasts he would occasionally throw. But I had a feeling that my wife was right about this particular invitation.

I reached the brick church as the sun was setting. I was expected, and was escorted down to the crypts and through the sliding screen with the painting of St. Stephen on it. Father Esaias was dining alone at a large oaken table. Another bowl was laid out opposite him. He motioned for me to join him.

"Greetings, my foolish friend," he said, ladling some stew into my bowl. "A brace of rabbits, fresh from the Emperor's personal forest. Try some."

"Don't mind if I do," I said, spooning some into my mouth. "Mmm. My compliments to the cook. And the poacher."

"And how is your good wife?" he asked politely.

"Well, thank you," I replied. "She sends her regards."

"Does she indeed?" he said. I could sense the smile under the

cowl even if I could not see it. "Meaning that she worries about you coming here without her."

"She does," I admitted. "Not so much for my safety here, but for what you want me to do."

"First, I want you to finish that rabbit," he said. "You'll be needing a full stomach for this little adventure."

"I need a full stomach no matter what the occasion," I said.

We finished our meal. He poured some more wine into my cup.

"I keep no ledger of our transactions," he said. "But I require a favor of you, and I believe that you owe me one."

"If it is within my powers, I shall do it," I said.

"You don't fear that I might want you to kill someone?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because you have enough killers working for you. If you need my talents, then you have something more unusual in mind."

"Your wit," he said. "That is what I need."

"Then it is a small favor," I said. "Tell me the nature of the problem."

"There are three men in my employ," he said. "As talented a trio of thieves as anyone could hope for. A few days ago, they executed a cunning and lucrative robbery of—well, the details need not concern you."

"They never do where you are concerned."

"The stolen items were concealed at a location known only to myself and the three of them. They guarded it in shifts, one man sleeping, the other two watching each other."

"And the booty has vanished."

"Precisely. And I want you to speak with them to determine which one is the culprit."

"It could be all three, working together."

"I don't think so," he said. "I chose these three because none of them trusts the others. They are ambitious, greedy, and ruthless men, and each would not hesitate to rat out his fellows. I think that this was the work of either one or two of them."

"I wonder, given your predilections, that you haven't obtained the information using your own methods."

"Because I abhor waste," he declared. "As I said, there is an abundance of felonious talent here, more valuable to me than the items I seek to recover. If I were to torture all three of them to get the information, then I will have destroyed at least one useful thief who is innocent."

"Relatively innocent," I corrected.

"Relatively innocent," he agreed.

"But why do you need me?" I asked.

"I need an independent mind," he explained. "I am so used to hearing lies, and they are so used to lying, that I can no longer discern the truth when it exudes from my minions. And interrogation by someone in authority would be fruitless. The questions of a fool, however, may be just what I need."

"Very well, I shall undertake your quest," I said. "Where are they?"

"I have placed each in a comfortable cell at different locations in the city, as far away from each other as possible. Each is being guarded by enough men to prevent corruption, and each has been fed well and provided with female companionship."

"Quite generous," I said. "Softening them up for me?"

"I believe that a man's last night on earth should be a memorable one," he said. "Father Theodore will bring you to them in the morning. Good evening, Fool."

Well, there it was. A small favor, I had joked. Now, I would use my little wit to pin a death sentence on a man. And me boasting about not worrying that Father Esaias would want me to kill someone.

I am not squeamish about the taking of a life. I have done it myself on more than one occasion, whether in defense or for the greater good. But to participate in the execution of a thief at the behest of a greater thief was not part of my job description.

Aglaia was understandably appalled.

"Is there no way you could refuse?" she asked. "I know that we are beholden to him, but to this extent?"

"Unfortunately, we may be," I said. "And there is another reason why I must do this."

"What is it?"

"If I don't, then he may very well have all three put to death. If I refuse him, then I will have forgone the opportunity to save two."

"Which would make you twice as just as Pontius Pilate," she snapped. "Only there are three thieves and no Saviors to choose from. Why should that be your problem?"

"I won't question it," I said. "Let me at least see the three men. Perhaps I will find something that will appeal to Father Esaias's sense of mercy."

"Appeal to a stone first," she replied. "You'll have a better chance."

The banging on our door shortly after sunrise echoed in my head as if it were at the Gates of Hell. I opened the door to see the for-

midable form of Father Theodore, one of Esaias's most feared henchman.

"You're up early," I said.

"Rather, not asleep yet," he replied. "I see now why people find the sunrise so attractive. Come, we have many places to travel."

Constantinople is an enormous city, the largest the world has ever seen. Most of the people live clustered along the branch of the Mese that runs from the Akropolis past Blachernae to the gate to the Adrianople road. However, there is a surprising amount of farmland within the city walls, mostly in the western half. Our first stop was at a farmhouse in this area.

"Father Esaias owns this farm?" I asked.

Father Theodore shrugged.

"The man you will be speaking with is named Julian," he said.

"Is that his true name?"

"As much as mine is Theodore and yours is Feste," he replied with a slight smile.

"Point taken," I said.

"The other two are Lontios and Tarasios. We'll see them in that order."

He knocked on the door, a series of long and short raps, and I heard a bar being withdrawn. It opened to reveal a group of ruffians, some of whom I recognized. They looked at us without surprise.

A young woman was wrapping a shawl around her shoulders, looking exhausted.

"Well?" said Father Theodore.

"Nothing," she said. "He only opened his mouth to . . . well, he didn't say anything useful."

"Never thought he would," said Father Theodore, handing her some coins. "We'll see you tonight."

She walked out. Father Theodore waited for a moment, then gestured to two of his men. They slipped out.

"Having her followed in case she's lying," I observed.

"Of course," he said. "You're on."

I tuned my lute and went inside!

Julian was a Greek by appearance, with curly black hair and a solid build. He was lying on a moldy straw pallet, idly scratching himself. He squinted as the door opened. He winced as he saw my whiteface and motley.

"Great," he said bleakly. "I've had the wine and the woman. Now comes the song. I should be condemned to death more often."

"Death?" I asked. "What makes you think that?"

"Come on," he said impatiently. "I don't want to play games."

"Nor do I," I said. "What would you like to hear?"

"Something dirty," he said.

I launched into a ribald ditty involving a pilgrim and a lusty farmer's daughter that drew a chuckle from him when I reached the punchline.

"You actually made me laugh," he marveled. "I didn't think I had any left in me."

"From what they told me, that's up to you," I said. "Or one of the others."

"Whoever confesses will have his throat slit," he said. "And if none of us do, we all die. Where's the incentive?"

"Saving your fellows," I said. "But I take it they don't mean anything to you."

"That was the beauty of the plan," he said. "No possibility of a conspiracy, and we watched each other like three hawks with only one mouse. Lontios and Tarasios can rot in hell for all I care, and they share my brotherly affections."

"Too bad," I said. "And the pity of it is, two of you shall die wondering who the best thief was."

"Until this happened, I would have thought it was me," he said ruefully. "The strongbox was in a cellar with only one door to it, and that was triple padlocked. We were together in the room outside the entire time, and even if the other two had tried to open it while I was sleeping, the noise of even just one of the padlocks being opened would have had me on my feet going for the nearest weapon inside a heartbeat. Yet in the morning, the padlocks were intact and the strongbox empty."

"A secret entrance?" I guessed. "A tunnel prepared beforehand?"

"Our good Father Esaias had the place ripped apart," he said. "There was none."

"I am puzzled that the thief thought he might actually get away with the betrayal," I said. "It seems futile, given Father Esaias's capacity for vengeance."

"Yet the treasure has vanished," said Julian. "Maybe the escape was the part of the plan that failed."

"Or the thief was prepared to die," I said.

"Why would he?" asked Julian with interest.

"Because he wanted to enrich someone he cared for, even if it cost him his own life."

"Then that lets me off," he said, clasping his hands on his chest.

"I care for no one but myself."

"Then I pity you," I said.

"Go away, Fool," he said. "I've had a wearying night. I want to get some rest before I sleep forever."

I left him there and closed the door.

"Well?" asked Father Theodore.

"A tough nut to crack," I said. "Do you know if he had anyone so close that he would sacrifice himself to help them?"

"We checked all three," said Father Theodore. "They were each alone in the world."

"Let's go see the others."

Lontios was a Syrian, a burly, burnished, bearded bear of a man. His cell was in the cellar of a bakery off the Forum of Arkadios. He was up and pacing when I was let into what could be his last room on earth.

"Get out," he growled. "I want no fool."

"If I don't work, I don't get paid," I said.

"What does that matter to me?" he asked.

"You've pried some loot out of Father Esaias already," I said. "Let me entertain you, and you'll pry a little more. A fitting epitaph for a master thief, don't you think?"

"Is that what they're saying?" he barked. "That I am the one who stole it?"

"That's just the gossip," I said, strumming my lute softly. "I wasn't paying that much attention, to tell you the truth. Would you like me to sing something? I know a few Syrian songs."

He rushed forward, grabbed me by my motley tunic, and slammed me against the wall so hard that my lute changed keys.

"What are they saying about me?" he shouted.

"That there is no honor among thieves, but especially among Syrian thieves," I said quickly.

He released me and stormed about.

"Damn those Greeks!" he shouted. "I've worked for them since I escaped from my first prison, and that's the respect I get."

"Oh, they respect you," I said. "They admire someone wily enough to pull this one off. They'll be talking of it long after your death."

"If I was smart enough to pull this off, I would have been smart enough to get away," he said, his voice shaking, but he shot me a sidelong glance as he said it.

"If it wasn't you, who do you think it was?" I asked.

"Julian's the smartest, but Tarasios is the sneakiest," he said. "I suspect Tarasios."

"How did he do it?" I asked. "One of you would have had to keep an eye on him at all times."

He looked down.

"I confess to nodding off for a few moments while he and I were standing watch together," he said, again giving me that sidelong look. "But I swear that wouldn't have given him enough time to spirit the goods out of that cellar."

"Could he have drugged you?" I asked.

"If I had felt the effects of some drug, I would have snapped his neck in a trice," he said.

"I believe that, certainly," I said, rubbing my still-aching head.

"You had better sing me that song," he said abruptly, sitting on his pallet. "I don't want you to be out anything."

I sang to him, and he rested his head on his knees.

"Thank you for that, Fool," he said softly when I finished.

"Shall I see to the epitaph?"

"You can't carve anything on an unmarked grave," he said. "Leave me to my doom."

I left him and went outside.

"Where is Tarasios?" I asked Father Theodore.

"This way," he said.

We walked along the southern seawall until we reached the Boukoleon Harbor. The fishing boat he led me to was decrepit, but the fishermen casually lolling about its deck were anything but. I descended a ladder into the hold.

Tarasios was a wiry, jittery fellow whose eyes darted every which way. When he espied my motley, he groaned.

"All I need, all I need," he said.

"Just part of the entertainment," I said.

"Could I get another woman instead?" he asked.

"Sorry, only one to a customer," I said. "What would you like to hear?"

"What would you like to hear?" he said. "That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"I heard that you were an astute man."

"Well?"

"I want to hear the truth," I said.

He gave a short, bitter bark of laughter.

"Truth," he said. "Would you know it if you heard it? You don't even know me. I could tell you sixteen different stories in the next minute, all of them plausible. Would you be able to find the true one?"

"They would all be variations on the only two stories that could be told," I said. "Either you are the one who took the loot, or you aren't."

He practically climbed the hull in frustration.

"I've told them, I've told the girl, I am telling you," he said. "I didn't take it, I didn't take it, I didn't take it."

He was almost in spasms, his indignation was so strong.

"Did you arrange for it to be taken?"

"Ha! Now that's an excellent question," he said. Then he leaned his face up to mine and shouted, "No!"

"Then who do you suspect of the others?" I asked.

"Julian," he said. "Don't know how, don't know when, but that's Julian for you. Lontios isn't subtle enough for this job. I could see him trying to take us both on at once, then break down the door and run, but not this, not this. Julian's my pick."

"Very well," I said. "Fancy a song before I go?"

"I don't sing," he said, with a wry grin.

I laughed in spite of myself.

"Thank you for the entertainment," I said as I climbed the ladder. The last thing I saw of him was his twitchy face looking up at the small bit of sky visible to him before the hatch door was slammed shut.

"Well?" said Father Theodore, looking quite sleepy in the noon-day sun.

"Take me to Father Esaias," I said.

He smiled, looking much less sleepy.

Father Esaias had just gotten up when we returned. Fortunately, he had already donned his cassock and cowl, saving me from the appetite ruination of his visage. He rubbed his bony hands before the fire.

"Wine?" he asked.

"Please," I said, and he poured me a generous helping.

"You have made a choice," he said.

"I have," I said. "Let me tell you what they told me."

He sat on a cushioned chair that an emperor would have coveted and listened intently until I finished.

"But there is nothing there," he said.

"There are two things," I said. "They both point to the same man."

"Which one?"

"Julian," I said. "Condemned on the demeanor of all three. Each told me that they did not take the strongbox. Each is an accomplished liar, yet both Lontios and Tarasios were nervous as cats on burning coals when they proclaimed their innocence. If they were lying, they would have denied their guilt as smoothly as Julian did."

"Suggestive," he said. "And the second thing?"

"The pride of a master thief," I said. "Both Lontios and Tarasios were willing to tell me that they thought someone else was a better thief. Lontios named Tarasios, and Tarasios named Julian. But Julian could not bring himself to place his ability below one of the others, even if it meant shifting attention away from him."

"Hmm," he said, pondering. "Any ideas how he spirited the strongbox from the cellar under the watchful eyes of the others?"

"I don't think he did," I said. "I think the theft occurred before the strongbox was placed in the cellar. A switch made on the way, perhaps."

"You've missed your calling," he mused. "You could become rich working for me."

"I like what I do now, thanks."

"Then you shall do it tonight," he declared. "We shall have a dinner at midnight, with three guests of honor. You and your wife will be part of the entertainment."

"And the other part?" I asked.

He laughed softly in response.

"Here's my question," said Aglaia as we walked to the church that night. "Are we going on before the throat-slitting, or after? It would be a difficult act to follow."

"Look, I'm not happy about this, either," I said.

"Or will it be a poisoning?" she continued. "What is the penalty for thievery among thieves? Will Father Theodore draw his mighty sword and behead him? Will Father Melchior strangle him? Or will Father Esaias do the deed himself, just to recapture his youth?"

"Let's just make sure we eat beforehand," I said.

"The first rule of the Fools' Guild," she muttered in disgust.

"Second rule," I corrected her. "The first involves drink."

Esaias's chambers had been transformed into a banquet hall, with tables set for fifty of his most favored minions. Aglaia and I set up near the foot of the table and began playing as the various thieves, grave robbers, murderers, and prostitutes slipped into the room and took their places. Father Esaias greeted each of them cordially, embracing some of them. Then there was an expectant murmur, and the three prisoners were led into the room and seated at the center table, directly across from the priest.

"Welcome, my friends," he said. "It's good of you to join us. Please, partake of my humble offerings."

Three plates were placed in front of them. They looked down at them in apprehension.

"I'm not especially hungry, thank you," said Tarasios.

"Would you prefer me to taste it for you?" asked Father Esaias solicitously.

"For God's sake, let's get it over with," growled Lontios, and he shoveled a spoonful into his mouth.

Julian followed his example. "Delicious," he said to Tarasios. "You should try it."

"Well, I won't stand on ceremony," said Father Esaias, standing to address the room. "These three men successfully executed an audacious and cunning plan, for which they have earned our admiration. They would have earned our gratitude as well, but one of them then executed an even more audacious and cunning plan. It is now time for him to receive his reward."

The other members of the organization leaned forward on their benches as Father Theodore stood quietly behind Julian, his hand slipping inside his cassock.

"Julian," said the priest, and the thief looked at him coolly. "For the crime of stealing the contents of the strongbox from under the very noses of two of the best thieves in Constantinople, I now sentence you to—a promotion!"

There were gasps and chuckles among the others in the room.

"You shall sit on the inner council and take part in the planning of all such thefts," continued Father Esaias. "You will, of course, return to us what you have taken, less the share that you have earned. Congratulations, my friend."

The other minions applauded wildly as Father Theodore removed a folded cassock and cowl from inside his own and presented it to Julian.

"Lontios," said Father Esaias. "For falling asleep while guarding an empty strongbox in a locked room, you shall forfeit your share of the proceeds and spend one year as a common thief before we let you back into the fold."

"Fair enough," said Lontios. "I shall not disappoint you again, Father."

"Tarasios," said Father Esaias, and the little man twitched. "On the one hand, you allowed Julian to hoodwink you. On the other hand, you guessed it was him. The two cancel each other out. You shall remain as you are."

"Thank you," sputtered Tarasios. He looked down at his meal, then started eating.

"My friends," said Father Esaias. "Eat up, for who knows what tomorrow will bring us?"

The party began in earnest, and the priest walked over to Aglaia and me.

"Relieved, Fool?" he asked.

"Surprised, in fact," I said.

"As I said, I abhor waste," he said. "I have been looking for some talented blood to join us."

"So, this was a test for them," said Aglaia.

"Of course," said the priest.

"But how can you trust Julian now?" she asked.

"I don't," said Father Esaias. "And I never will."

"But the death sentence is rescinded, isn't it?" I asked.

In the shadows of his cowl, I thought I saw the faintest hint of a smile.

"No," he said. "Merely postponed. He will work for me knowing that he lives under a sentence of death."

He turned as if to leave, then paused and turned back to us.

"But don't we all?" he said, and then he left us, chuckling softly to himself.

"Do we owe him any more favors?" asked Aglaia.

"Probably," I said. "You take the next one, all right?" 🐦

CONVERSATION WITH

ALAN GORDON

Alan Gordon has published five books in his medieval historical series featuring jester Theophilus, a member of the Fools' Guild. His most recent is An Antic Disposition, published earlier this year by St. Martin's. The first in the series, Thirteenth Night, has been recently reissued by Crum Creek Press. He is a criminal defense attorney with the Legal Aid Society of New York and has recently joined the Lehman Engel/BMI Musical Theater Workshop as a lyricist. He is currently working on a contemporary novel.

AHMM: Members of the Fools' Guild operate somewhat as secret agents dispatched throughout Europe. How did you come up with this idea? What are the advantages of having a Fool as a protagonist, especially in

a stratified society?

AG: I wanted to use a Fool because I became enamored of them while studying Shakespeare. The idea of a character who had license to mock the powerful was intriguing. I liked the idea of Festè working behind the scenes of *Twelfth Night* to bring the lovers together, and to have to return to the scene years later to solve Orsino's death. When researching the history, I was reading about guilds, and thought, why not a fools' guild? I later discovered that such guilds did exist, although not with the crimesolving/espionage angle that I used. There was, however, at least one example of a fool who was a spy, and who would stumble drunkenly across battlefield lines without challenge.

A fool, more perhaps than any other person in medieval society, had access to every level. They would perform for royalty, religious

figures, the mighty, and the low. Ideally, they would be gifted athletes and linguists, which gave my characters a great deal of flexibility. Especially the contortionists.

AHMM: Why did you choose the turn of the 13th century, and especially the turbulent time of the 3rd and 4th Crusades, as a setting for your series?

AG: The play *Twelfth Night* was set in Illyria, which became Dalmatia. The most interesting historical event I came across in Dalmatia was the conquest of Zara (now Zagreb) as a precursor to the invasion of Byzantium by the 4th Crusade. The cynicism of a crusade diverted to attack Christians because of a trade rivalry lent itself nicely to having the Fools' Guild oppose it. That took me through the first three books. *The Widow of Jerusalem*, the fourth book, was inspired by a footnote I ran across in my research, which took me into a prequel during the 3rd Crusade.

AHMM: The story in this issue takes place in Constantinople. How difficult was it to recreate the city in your novels and stories?

AG: Fortunately, there was a great deal written about Constantinople, which was the largest city in Europe during this time. Many accounts contemporaneous with the period survived. I was particularly indebted to the historian Niketas Choniates, who lived through the 4th Crusade and was a tremendous collector of gossip. He became a character in my second and third books. The layout of the city was well documented by travelers and artists, and some of

the buildings still survive.

My first book used an imaginary medieval town, with much of the research dedicated to how it might be laid out, the architecture, the economy, etc. I look for maps whenever possible. Thirteenth century Acre, for example, was sketched by Marino Sanudo, and I eliminated the portion I knew to be constructed after the 3rd Crusade. Slesvig, the Danish city of *An Antic Disposition*, was built on a river emptying into a fjord with an island fortress at the river's mouth. I was able to apply what I learned about medieval Danish architecture to conjure up a plausible version of it for the book. I actually have more freedom to invent when less is known, but when things are known, I stick to them.

AHMM: *Thirteenth Night* and *An Antic Disposition* enlarge upon the plays *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*, respectively. What are the challenges of following in Shakespeare's footsteps?

AG: Trying not to get gimmicky or cute with it. I am taking the characters out of the narrow focus of Illyria and Elsinore and putting them into the larger political context of medieval Europe. I gave them longer histories than Shakespeare did—*An Antic Disposition* covers over twenty years in the lives of the characters. It also is based not so much on *Hamlet* as the original written source for the play, a Danish history written in 1204 by an unreliable historian named Saxo Grammaticus. But there will be many surprises for those familiar with either or both versions.

KAPITAN'S LATE SHIFT

ROBERT GRAY

Eddie lowered himself painfully to his knees. He twirled the safe's dial left, stopped at twenty-four, then spun it right to ten, freezing there the second time by. His fingers trembled visibly now. He willed himself to be calm and twisted the dial left to five. It was dark under the counter, and his eyesight wasn't great. Time was running out. He was scared.

Eddie Kapitan held the front door of Millbridge Dash Mart open with his arthritic hip, letting the air-conditioning cool his back for a couple of seconds before he stepped forward and the door closed behind him. He smelled rain and glanced at the sky, where storm clouds now tumbled. He expected to hear thunder any moment. A distant bell at St. Bridget's rang nine o'clock.

Styrofoam cups and pop bottles littered the weathered picnic table under the awning. Swarms of insects flew strafing missions from the fluorescent lights above. A copy of the *Rutland Herald*, its contents long since digested, lay at the center of this mess, discarded like an orange peel.

Might as well be their servant, he thought as he picked up the garbage and limped over to the trash pail. Sure as hell wasn't like this when he owned the garage. People respected mechanics a lot more than shopkeepers; he'd learned that much in his seventy-eight years. The folks who'd known him when Kapitan's was the best garage for miles around had long forgotten how much they had needed him back in those days; their kids only knew him as "Pop" Kapitan, the mini-mart guy.

"Let Pop pick up the trash. Ain't good for nothing else," he mumbled as he pressed down the contents of the can. He probably should change the bag now, too, but he didn't feel like it.



"Hey Eddie," Bill Parker called from the sidewalk. His voice was as unsteady as his gait.

Eddie waved. Bill often walked home from Moody's Lounge when he'd had one too many, leaving his car there until the next morning. Eddie recalled that Bill had been sitting at the picnic table all afternoon; should make him clean up this damn mess.

"Looks like rain," Bill said, looking upward.

"Yup."

"What're you doing here so late, Eddie?"

"Mary needed the night off," he said, biting his tongue even as the words came out. This town didn't need much information to get rumors started. Nobody had to know what his daughter was up to, but everybody would if he told Bill. The most innocent thing, like Mary going out with a lawyer from Rutland who happened to be separated from his wife, tended to get exaggerated when tongues wagged. His daughter had an apartment in Rutland, and her personal life should be nobody's business but her own. Mary had already wasted too many years keeping the store for him. He was all for her finding something better if she could.

"You want some company?" Bill asked, his words slurred and barely intelligible.

"No, you best go home, Bill."

"Well, good night, Eddie."

"Night." Eddie watched Bill shuffle away. Another guy whose best days were long gone. Things change; that was the hell of it for everybody. Hard to even imagine now that Bill had been one maniac of a forklift jockey at the marble mill in his day. They used to call him A. J., for that race car driver. Tore around those narrow alleys between pallets and down the center of the shop floors like he was headed for a checkered flag. Eddie had seen that show more than a few times when he got called out there on repair jobs the mill mechanics couldn't handle.

A ten-year-old VW Jetta, showing every bit of its age, sped into the lot and stopped at the gas pumps. It had no rear license plate, though Eddie saw something propped up in the back window that might have been a temporary. He noticed somebody else in the car. Looked like a man with long hair, but could have been another woman. Eddie was surprised to see a crack that snaked across the glass from one end to the other. Who the hell breaks their back window?

A girl got out and studied the pump instructions, then frowned and removed the nozzle. He knew what she was thinking. A lot of places had that setup now where you could pay right at the pump

with a credit card and not even meet the people who owned the place. Mary thought they should put in that system too, but Eddie was from the old school. He believed you should look your customers in the eye. Eddie went back inside to switch on the pump, then stood by the door and watched.

After she gassed up, the girl removed the nozzle from her tank quickly, and Eddie saw the last drops of fuel coat the side of her car. Great for the paint job. She walked toward him, her head down, maybe aware that she was under scrutiny. She wore tight denim shorts and a flimsy top that exposed her belly button. Her hair was long and kind of messy. Feeling guilty, Eddie returned to his place behind the counter. As he did so, he heard the roar of a busted muffler and knew by the sound that it was Kenny Dwyer, stopping by for his nightly six-pack.

Eddie was safely behind the counter when the door opened and the girl entered.

"How you doing?" Eddie asked. "Nice night if it don't rain."

"Good . . . yeah," she replied, not really looking at him as she hurried down an aisle toward the coolers. She could be a shoplifter, he thought, recognizing the signs—quick moves, averted eyes, mumbling—but his suspicions eased when she came right back with a six-pack of Coors Light and slammed it down on the counter. If she'd wanted to lift something, he couldn't imagine where she would hide it anyway, with her skimpy outfit. She studied the candy selection just below the countertop, grabbed a couple of Kit Kat bars, and tossed them next to the beer.

"I got gas, five bucks." She said it as if there were a dozen people in line and he might be confused about which one she was. She handed him a crumpled fifty. "And two packs of Marlboro Lights."

"Got some ID for the beer?" he asked, reaching for the cigarettes in the overhead racks. She frowned and dug in her pocket, removing a card. The older Eddie got, the less he could tell about ages with these kids. They were all babies to him, even the thirty year olds, even his daughter, who was forty-five, though Mary had never been like this one—rebellious, angry, edgy—not even when she was a teenager. Maybe she should have been.

The picture on the card looked just like the girl, as if it had been taken that morning and she hadn't combed her hair since. Her name was Francine, but he'd bet a thousand dollars she didn't go by it. She would hate that name; probably hated her parents for saddling her with it. She wouldn't be a Fran, either. She'd have taken a nickname early and stuck with it. Born in 1978. Lived in

White Creek, New York. He handed the card back to her. She wouldn't want him to comment on any of these facts or ask what had brought her to Millbridge tonight; Eddie knew that much. He knew people.

Eddie rang up her order and gave her change as the door swung open and in came Kenny, his Red Sox cap pulled down low, hiding his eyes. His jeans and denim shirt were caked with dirt from his day hauling logs down from Gable Mountain, where they were clearing land for some flatlander's second home.

"Hey, Kenny."

"Hey, Eddie," he replied, though he was staring at the girl. She tucked strands of hair behind her left ear self-consciously, and Eddie noticed that her gnawed-to-the-nub fingernails were painted black. Kenny brushed against a wire snackcake display rack, nearly toppling it, then followed the girl's trail to the beer cooler.

"Matches?" she asked impatiently, as if Eddie had been an idiot for not offering. There was an open carton of them on the counter, so he just pointed at it. The matchbooks were yellow and featured the mini-mart's franchise logo on the cover. She grabbed two and stuffed them in her pocket, then left.

"Thanks," Eddie said to her back, adding under his breath, "Come again when you can't stay so long."

Eddie really didn't like kids, not at any age.

Kenny returned with two six-packs of Bud. He muttered that he'd pumped three dollars worth of gas and handed over a credit card. He'd been using that card a lot lately to pay for little stuff. Must be having money troubles.

"Rough day?" Eddie asked.

"Seen better," Kenny growled. Eddie could smell beer on his breath.

After Kenny signed his slip, he picked up the beer and stumbled away, slamming into the door with his shoulder like a linebacker as he headed outside. His yellow receipt still lay on the counter. Eddie picked it up and tore it to pieces. He heard the rotten exhaust system on Kenny's rustbucket thunder to life again. The mechanic in Eddie wanted to get under that truck and fix the damn thing once and for all.

Slow night. It was so quiet that Eddie thought about turning on the little television set they kept on the wall behind the counter, right next to the monitor for the security cameras. He usually didn't like having the set on when customers were in the store; seemed rude. Since it was coming up on ten, he checked TV

Guide to see what was playing next. As he ran his finger down the schedule grid from one program to the next, a word kept repeating itself in his head—*crap, crap, and crap*—until he decided that the quiet wasn't so bad after all.

He left his post for a perimeter check to see that all the freezer and cooler doors were closed and to check on the coffee situation. He noticed that a couple of beers were missing from a six-pack of Michelob. He thought he'd faced off the stuff in the coolers an hour ago, and nobody had bought beer since Kenny and that girl had come in around nine. Maybe he'd missed these, or maybe somebody had pinched them when he wasn't looking, or maybe he was just getting old and nuts, losing his memory and his mind.

Instead of making more coffee, he decided to shut off the coffee machines for the night. If anybody wanted coffee this late, he'd just say they should cut back on the stuff. He filled the glass pots with hot water and a little dish soap.

He returned to the counter and sat on a stool he kept back there. Time was he could stay on his feet all day, but in recent years he needed to adjust to his condition, especially the way his hip acted up. At Royall's Furniture he'd bought a high, leather-cushioned bar stool on clearance sale. It helped take some of the ache out of his long days here.

Eddie stared through the narrow opening above the counter at the rest of the store, or what he could see of it, which was less and less every week. When they first built the counter as part of the renovation back in '80, it had been one long uncluttered surface. Over the years, they'd added candy racks, an overhead cigarette fixture that showed people their choices without letting them touch the product, and a hundred other little odds and ends, which had piled up and taken over the space. Now, whoever worked the register could only peer through a three-foot-square window, like the mouth of a cave. Eventually he was sure the gap would close altogether and he'd have to stop serving customers.

The phone rang and startled Eddie; he nearly fell off the stool as he reached for the handset.

"Dash Mart," he said.

"Hi, it's me. Sorry to bother you, Dad, but I couldn't remember if I turned out the lights in the bottle room when I left. I'm such a ditz. Will you double-check for me?"

"Sure." Eddie smiled. Mary called to check up on him whenever he closed. She always pretended that it was something she had done or not done, but he knew she thought he was too old for this, that the late shift was more complicated, what with all the closing

procedures. He also suspected that she didn't like his being there alone at night, worried what he'd do if something happened. The later the hour, the stranger the customer, even in a small town. He worried too sometimes, though he'd never told her that.

"How's your date going?" he asked.

"Please, Dad. It's not a date, just a bite to eat and a movie. We're not teenagers."

"Must be the late show." He liked teasing her, liked having a reason to tease. And she sounded good tonight. Sometimes when he heard her voice, a little worn out and gloomy, he had to remind himself that she wasn't as old as he was.

"Very funny, Dad. We're just having a drink with some friends. I promise I'll get home at a decent hour. Not that you'll know."

"In that case, you can stay out until midnight instead of eleven."

She laughed, a rare treat for Eddie. He wished he were funnier and could make her laugh more often.

"How was the movie?" he asked.

"Fine. Busy tonight?"

"Dead. Don't think I've had six customers since nine, and two of them were Bert Wilson's brats, who probably stole the night's profits anyway."

"Did you see them take stuff?"

"Nah, they're good at it. I think Bert sent them to shoplifting preschool."

"Dad, you've got to crack down. Don't be such a softy."

"You sound just like your mother." He said it before he could stop himself, and the words nearly froze the tip of his tongue. Silence fell for a moment, just long enough to matter, as if Jeanne herself had stepped between them.

"Okay, Dad. I'll let you go. See you tomorrow."

"Have fun, kid." He waited to hear that she had hung up before replacing the phone in its cradle.

Just like your mother: a blessing, a curse, a daily reminder of all that had been shared and all that had been taken away.

Jeanne died in 1986, but her sickness had begun a half-dozen years earlier. Eddie was sure it had a lot to do with the way their lives changed after 1978, though the doctors insisted that her tumor had probably been growing for a few years before that. But there was no doubt about the fact that 1978 was the year their world fell apart. They damn near went bankrupt after Fred Ames's Buick Riviera fell off a jack and shattered Eddie's leg. Put him out of work for a year. Cost him the garage.

His best mechanic left town while Eddie was laid up. They

couldn't find anybody as good to fill in. People got used to going somewhere else to get their cars fixed. To survive, to avoid complete ruin, Eddie signed on to a franchise deal in 1980, hooking up with this company out of Albany and converting his garage into a mini-mart.

What a job that had been, to erase the garage from this spot as if it had never existed, as if he hadn't spent twenty years of his life building it into something he could be proud of, with Jeanne right by his side, keeping the books and handling the customers so he could concentrate on their cars. And Mary had grown up in this building too; already pumping gas before she went to school, running the cash register by the time she was ten.

The Dash Mart people had left the shell of the building, but gutted and hauled away everything else; covered the high garage doors with wood-grain aluminum siding on the outside and sheetrock on the inside; installed banks of fluorescent lights; jammed the place with coolers and shelving.

Eddie had to sell off most of his tools and spare parts. What he couldn't sell, he gave away or tossed out to make room for the renovations. He missed his tools most; losing them had felt like an amputation. Later, Jeanne decorated his office in the back of the store with a few things she'd salvaged from the mess after the renovators finished, so he would have a place of his own to go to, a memory place. On his desk, for a paperweight, she put the chrome-plated monkey wrench she'd given him long ago. It was inscribed with the name of the shop and date of its opening. She cleaned up a grease-covered coffee mug with their logo on it, to store his pens and pencils. In one corner she leaned an old-fashioned tire pump against the wall. On the walls she hung a cracked glass ESSO sign as well as the small maple sign that used to be in the front window, with its silhouette of a man, woman, and child standing together above the words KAPITAN'S FAMILY GARAGE, QUALITY SERVICE SINCE 1958.

Eddie didn't spend much time in his office; it made him feel calm, sad, and angry at the same time. A damn failure too. Every now and then, especially on muggy summer nights, Eddie was sure he could smell the oil that had soaked into these floors over the years.

He preferred to step outside whenever he could, as he did now, since nobody was in the store. The town was pretty quiet tonight. He heard a couple of cars accelerate away from the traffic light a few hundred yards north of the store. A two-year-old Chevy Cavalier came into view, exceeding the speed limit and pulling

away rapidly from a VW Jetta—the same car, he quickly realized, that had stopped for gas an hour or so ago. The Jetta moved slowly past, the two people inside not even glancing his way. Strange, though, he thought, that the White Creek girl was still cruising the streets of Millbridge.

He heard another car pick up speed, probably to beat the yellow light. Its fan belt squealed in protest. He wondered if they would stop to have him check it out, but the car shot past, in a hurry to get somewhere, or nowhere, more likely.

Sometimes people still needed Eddie's advice as a mechanic. Locals stopped by to have him listen to their engines before taking their cars to crooked dealers. Tourists sometimes limped in with overheated engines, busted hoses, or oil leaks, and Eddie didn't mind helping them out. Though his hands were stiff with the arthritis, he was amazed at how they remembered what to do once the hood was up, even on these new cars with more computer terminals than hoses.

He went back inside the store, thinking about his wife again. It was another thing that being here alone on late shift did to him. Maybe another thing Mary worried about—too much time to think about his mistakes.

Jeanne had been a trooper during the transition year, but soon after she became too sick to work, and she asked Mary to take a break from college during her senior year and come back to help Eddie, especially with the books, which were not his strength. Never had been.

Eddie had tried to argue against bothering Mary, but the women teamed up on him and he surrendered, though he insisted it was just for a little while, until they got back on their feet, that as soon as possible Mary should get on with her own life. His daughter insisted that she didn't mind at all, and maybe she didn't then, but how was she to know she would still be here more than two decades later? How was he to know such a thing could happen to them so quickly and so gradually at the same time?

Mary had settled for less than she deserved was what happened. She married Sam Randolph's boy Carl in 1982, but that didn't last. He ran off with an English teacher from the high school three years later. Then Jeanne died and things just kind of stopped altogether for both Eddie and Mary.

They survived. That was the best face he could put on it. Mary never went back to college, even after he told her he could run the place just fine with a couple of part-timers. She seemed to get old real quick. He'd let her down.

He rubbed his eyes, then switched on the little TV. A doctor had his bloody hand stuffed inside a man's chest and was screaming for some instrument while nurses rushed frantically around him. "I'm losing him!" shouted the doctor, as if it would be the nurses' fault if the patient died.

Memories wore him out.

Around ten forty-five a thunderstorm had blown through and seemed to drive the last few stragglers off the streets of Millbridge. Well-spaced lightning flashes, distant rumbles, and a misty rain were all that trailed behind the worst of it. No one had come into the store since ten thirty, and now, a minute or two before closing, Eddie went outside and saw nothing but empty, glistening pavement spotlit by streetlights.

He wheeled in the oil and window washer fluid displays, locked the front door, and returned to the cashier's station, where he switched off the gas pumps, a signal to Millbridge that the store was officially closed for the night. He flipped all the switches for the interior lights, except the one that controlled the two fluorescents above the counter. Only the lights under the awning, the neon beer signs in the windows, and a couple of security lights over by the back wall would be on by the time he left.

He had already created the starting pack for tomorrow by wrapping fifty singles, ten fives, and five tens in a rubber band. He tossed it in the small safe tucked down on the floor under the counter, but left the door open for a moment. The change stayed in the drawer. He placed the rest of the cash, checks, and credit card receipts in the bank deposit bag, which he would leave at the night drop on the way home. From habit, he shoved the bag into the safe and locked the door. A couple of times during the past year he'd gone home after finishing his closing procedures and left the bag on the counter all night. He'd gotten more forgetful with age and now had to compensate with preventive maintenance or else important tasks tended to be left unfinished.

There was a sharp rap at the door—probably Mary back from her date, checking up on him again. Eddie eased himself off the stool and walked around the counter. He was surprised to see the bedraggled girl who'd bought gas earlier standing, drenched and sickly looking, beneath the harsh overhead lights.

"What's the trouble?" Eddie yelled through the glass. The keys

were in his hand, but he wasn't going to unlock just yet. You couldn't be too careful these days.

"I broke down," she shouted. "Can I use your phone, mister?"

"Wait a minute." He walked back to the counter to get the portable phone. He wasn't going to let her in at this hour, but he couldn't just ignore her. Besides, it was warmer out there. She'd catch cold inside, wet as she was and the air-conditioning and coolers keeping this place like the Arctic Circle.

He unlocked the door, opened it a crack, and handed her the phone. She stared at it as if she'd never seen one before, her hands still so wet they dripped. She did not punch a number right away. Instead, she looked up at him. He thought she was going to ask him to dial for her.

"You just stall out, or what?" Eddie asked.

"What?" She stared at him as if he were speaking a foreign language.

"Your car."

"Yeah. Stalled out at the light. Can't get it started."

"Is it turning over or just dead?"

She shrugged. "Turning over, won't catch."

Eddie nodded. "I could have a look. Might be flooded, or maybe a loose . . ."

The phone slipped like a fish through her fingers and clattered to the cement in front of her.

"Oops," Eddie said, pushing the door open and stepping out. As he bent down to retrieve it for her, she shoved the door and the glass banged hard against the side of his head. He staggered back into the store, still doubled over, and the girl shot past him.

"Hey!" he shouted, but she'd already reached the counter and run behind it, out of sight. He heard the cash drawer open as he started after her, then felt hands push him roughly from behind. He pitched forward without any chance to keep his balance and hit the tile hard, feeling more pain flash through his hip. He managed to keep his head from smacking the floor by shielding it with his right arm, though as his elbow hit he felt something snap and knew he'd broken it. He lay on his stomach and didn't move, waiting to see what would happen next. Dash Mart's policy was that you should cooperate fully and let the cops deal with it later, but these two had not even given him a chance to cooperate. His situation was pretty clear. He'd been a fool to let her in, and now he would pay a fool's price.

"Is it back there?" yelled a man from the doorway. The voice belonged, Eddie was sure, to the other person who'd been in the

car when they stopped for gas earlier. *Casing the joint*, they called it on the TV. But why had she used an ID to buy beer? Fake probably, like her name.

"I don't see anything," she said with irritation. Her voice was calmer than he might have expected. They'd done this before.

"Where is it, old man?"

"Where's what?"

"You know what—the night deposit bag. Don't be stupid, man. It ain't worth getting hurt for a few bucks."

"In the safe."

"You see the safe?" the guy said.

Boxes were shuffled and something hit the floor. Eddie heard a glass shatter, then what sounded like a table full of goods swept aside and crashing down.

"See it?" the guy asked again.

"I see it, I see it. Christ, give me a break."

Eddie heard her try the latch a couple of times.

"Locked," she said.

"Get up, old man," the guy said.

Eddie rolled over to his side and tried to push himself upright with his left arm. "I think my wing's broke." Now he got a look at the man. He was older than the girl by at least ten years, maybe twenty. His face was lined slightly and his features thin and drawn out the way some guys get when they drink and smoke, like the Marlboro Man gone bad. He had his right hand in his jacket pocket, pointing it at Eddie like a gun. Maybe it was a gun. Maybe it wasn't. Eddie saw no future in doubting him.

"Open it," said the man.

Eddie thought about trying to convince them he didn't know the combination, but he was here alone, so they probably wouldn't buy the fact that the day's receipts had managed to get into the safe on their own. Best to just go along with this thing. Get it over with. Stay alive.

"Never been held up before," said Eddie as he got to his knees, then slowly stood. The ache in his hip almost made him pass out. Punks, that's all they were, he thought, but he'd have to go along.

"First time for everything, old man," said the guy. He shoved Eddie forward, which nearly triggered another fall, but Eddie reached for the counter and stayed upright. He moved gingerly around back to where the girl waited. She had taken a pack of cigarettes from the rack overhead and opened them. As Eddie came up to where she stood by the safe, she reached in front of him and grabbed a book of matches.

"Open it," she said, as if he hadn't gotten the message the first time.

"My arm's broke," he repeated.

"Use your left hand."

"I never opened it with my left hand before. I'm right-handed."

She looked at him with that sulky irritation he'd seen earlier.

"Open it," she repeated, a chill to her tone and in her stare, a lack of emotion that scared him some. Eddie lowered himself to his knees and began to spin the dial awkwardly. Left until he passed eight twice, then a full stop at twenty-four.

"This is taking too long," said the guy.

Right to ten, stopping there the second time by.

"Shut up," she said. "You're such a punk."

Left to five, tumblers should release. He pushed down firmly on the handle, but it wouldn't budge. Eddie's left hand trembled. The safe was new and very sensitive. He must have missed one of the numbers by a fraction of an inch. It was too dark and his eyesight wasn't great to begin with.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. She wouldn't want to hear excuses. The man kicked him in the side and Eddie doubled over as the shoe slammed again into his bad hip.

"Leave the poor bastard alone," she said. "You've already messed him up. We just want the money. You don't need to get off beating up on a cripple."

The guy muttered something, but he stopped.

"What's your name, mister?" she asked.

"Eddie."

"Okay, Eddie. Here's the deal. Concentrate with all you got this time to open this safe, okay? It ain't hard. You done it a million times. We don't want to hurt you no more than you're already hurt. We want to get out of here just as bad as you want to get rid of us. So try harder."

He did try harder. He really did. Again, however, the lever wouldn't budge when he finished.

"Jesus!" yelled the man in frustration, storming away from them and slamming his fist on the counter. "Let me do it. He can tell me the combination."

"I said shut up and I mean shut up. You're making Eddie nervous. He needs to concentrate. Let's see if this helps."

She put the cigarette pack on the counter and flipped open the matchbook. Peeling off one of the matches, she struck it. As the flame glowed, she touched it to the tip of the cover and held the

book up to her eyes, watching the tiny blaze consume the paper. Just before it reached the rest of the matches, when Eddie was sure she was going to torture him with it, she tossed it casually, but with surprising force, over her shoulder. It flashed up just as it disappeared beyond the counter, flying in a crazy pattern like a crashing plane.

The matchbook could have landed safely on the ice cream freezer or on the tile floor, or it could have fallen on top of the paper towels at the end of the kitchen goods section, or in the chip rack, where the bags might be already be blackening.

"Concentrate, Eddie," she said calmly, almost soothingly, as she plucked another matchbook from the box and pulled off the single ignition match.

Eddie willed his left hand steady, though it felt numb, as if the swelling in his right arm had spread across his shoulders and down his good side.

Left past eight twice . . .

Nothing.

Snap! Another match flaming. The girl just shook her head, clearly disappointed with Eddie's performance thus far. Again she tossed the matchbook out into the store just before it ignited.

"This is stupid!" said the guy. Eddie knew his tone was meant to be threatening, but it sounded nervous and whiney, even scared. They had been here too long. The plan wasn't working.

This time the girl didn't wait for Eddie, nor did she say anything more to him. She simply grabbed the box containing the other matchbooks and walked away. She lit one pack after another and flipped them out over the store like Molotov cocktails as she moved slowly up the aisle. War had been declared.

The guy stared at Eddie with hateful eyes, and Eddie couldn't help feeling he'd let these folks down. So he tried again, spun the dial, stopped where he should stop, and spun again until he reached that final number. He grasped the latch, but he couldn't bear to twist it. He just knew he'd blown it again. He simply couldn't make his left hand obey orders. He took a deep breath, applied pressure to the latch. It did not move.

The girl sang from somewhere in the aisles, teasing him. "Eddie! You're not trying hard enough."

He looked down at the safe. It taunted him as well. He smelled smoke and something more toxic, like burning plastic.

"Man, look what you did," the guy said. "Somebody's gonna see that. To hell with it, let's get out of here. It ain't worth it."

Eddie's eyes watered, but he did not move.

"Grab some smokes," she said. Eddie stayed hunched over, still fiddling with the dial, as she came back behind the counter and stacked cartons of cigarettes while her partner stuffed them into paper bags. He picked up three sacks and took off. She continued to fill a few more, not rushing at all.

"C'mon," he shouted from over by the door. "Jesus!"

"Get the car," she said calmly. "You better haul your butt out of here too, Eddie. This place is a mess. You should've opened that safe when you had the chance. Now look what you've done."

She disappeared, but Eddie stayed behind the counter until he heard their squealing tires. When he stood, the smoke was so thick in the aisles that he couldn't see the coolers. Flames shot above the top of the chip aisle, which seemed to be where most of the fire was concentrated. On the shelves facing him, toys began to melt—little cars and trucks, soldiers and cowboys, dolls and spaceships already squashed or twisted into shapes nobody could recognize, nobody could buy.

The awful heat came at him in waves. He felt nauseous and faint, but he did not panic. It wasn't too late. There was still time to get out. He took a deep breath, held it, and limped around the counter.

Crouching as low as he could, he moved toward the door. He noticed the portable phone on the floor, right where the girl had dropped it. He sat back against the glass and slid down because he couldn't bend. He reached across the floor for the phone and picked it up with his left hand, shifted it to his right, despite the pain. His eyes watered and his breath came in raw gasps.

He pressed the TALK button.

Millbridge had a dedicated volunteer fire department and a pretty decent chief of police. If he dialed right now, he could unleash forces that were used to dealing with messes like this—firemen to put out the blaze and cops to run down those two punks. Eddie pressed nine with his left thumb. He pressed one. Then he turned the phone off. It was almost like his problems with the combination to the safe, as if his hand would not obey the commands his brain sent down there.

He couldn't call them yet because he had questions: What if the goddamn place burned to the ground? Would Mary rebuild? The flames now licked at the tile ceiling. The blaze hadn't reached him yet, but smoke completely enveloped the interior. He knew he would pass out if he didn't leave this minute. With what strength he could muster, Eddie struggled to his feet, leaned against the door, and felt the keys he'd left there dig into

his back. He pulled the keys out of the lock, knowing it was a stupid and pointless thing to do, then pressed hard against the glass and the door gave way. He tumbled outside, gasping for breath as he staggered away, gulping at the fresh night air.

Disoriented and woozy, he stumbled like a drunk toward the rear of the store. Had the fire made it back there yet? Maybe he could still get to his office, gather up the paperwork he'd left on the desk earlier. Mary always nagged him about keeping the records in the office safe, which was fireproof. She'd called to check on him and he'd screwed up anyway.

What he really wanted to rescue was the chrome-plated monkey wrench, the one Jeanne had given him. If he could just get that, the rest of this pile could burn in hell. He fumbled in his pockets for the keys as he approached the steel door, but just before he inserted the key in the lock, he put the heel of his left hand against the metal. It was like touching a stove.

"Aaagh!" he yelled, backing away, the heat like a second wall keeping him out. He breathed deep again, walking backward, away from everything. Let it go, he thought. Just let it go. It's only a wrench. Jeanne had given him other, better gifts. She'd given him herself. She'd given him Mary.

Eddie let the blaze smoke out his past, like some kind of ceremony. He thought of old westerns he'd seen, where Indians burned the dead on a high pyre, sending their spirits to the sky in the smoke and ashes.

He was surprised when he noticed that he still clutched the phone in his gimpy right hand. He knew it was time to call somebody, but he waited. He waited until the store filled completely with flames, until smoke poured from the eaves to form a pillar of ash that climbed toward the ragged thunderheads. He waited until he heard a distant car accelerate from the traffic light up the street. Then he dialed 911. It was late, but it wasn't too late, because this wasn't a tragedy. He knew what tragedy felt like. ♫

BLEEDING HEARTS

L. A. WILSON, JR.

“I want you to look into something for me.”

Waymon Hayes stared at the man with more than a little trepidation. When people like Alger Hanson asked things of a man, he should prepare to be screwed.

“It’ll be all over the papers in the morning,” Hanson continued. “I’m being hit with a sexual harassment suit.”

Hanson wouldn’t look at him as he talked. He still had that air of superiority about him, as if stooping to ask Hayes for help was beneath him.

Perhaps it should have been beneath him, Hayes thought. Alger Hanson was chief of the Atlanta police force. He had always been a condescending son of a bitch. When he was head of Internal Affairs, he had taken one look at Hayes and decided he was guilty of whatever they said he did. Hell, he was guilty, but that wasn’t the point. The point was that Hanson could have at least done his job before feeding him to the wolves.

Like they always said, what goes around comes around. Hanson claimed to be innocent, and maybe he was, but being accused is often a career-ending stroke. He told a convincing story, but he needed something on the woman who had accused him of touching her inappropriately—something that would leave him as a victim beyond reproach.

Hayes listened attentively; after all, he was getting paid for his time. He didn’t like Hanson and had that uncomfortable feeling that there was more to the story than what he was being fed. He took it for what it was worth and kept his mouth shut. He knew why he was there. Hanson needed someone who was down and dirty, someone used to slithering through society’s underbelly and someone who needed money badly enough to be willing to bend the truth a bit if necessary to secure a desirable outcome. Hayes

was all of that and more. He just had trouble deciding if his need for money outweighed his distaste for this man.

Interstate 85 was a northbound parking lot where everyone crouched behind tinted windows in air-conditioned comfort grateful for their refuge from Atlanta's stifling heat and suffocating pollution. None of this mattered to the people on Peachtree Circle. They lived in one of those Northside communities presumed to have privilege and an exclusivity that prohibited everything except the rarefied air.

Embroiled in scandal, Hanson had no friends and no support. He needed someone down and dirty. Hayes was all that and more.

Hayes had known Jana Hanson since before she lived in places like that. There had been a time when she had been a regular person and did the things that regular people did. That was before her string of upscale boutiques caught fire with the public and before she married an up-and-coming police administrator.

Hayes went to see her when he knew her husband was at work. There were things he needed to know—things that he wouldn't be encouraged to learn.

Jana opened the door and looked at him in an almost disinterested fashion.

"I didn't think it would be you," she said. "But I knew it would be somebody like you. You working for the good guys or the bad guys?"

"Depends on your point of view. I'm working for your husband."

She glared at him without smiling. There was a gritty, sullen quality about her. It was that joyless air that goes with being chronically pissed off about something, about everything.

"So what do you want from me?"

"I want to know what you think."

"I think what my husband thinks."

"Then why do the two of you think that a fellow police officer would accuse your husband of inappropriate advances?" Hayes's impatience with her haughty replies was becoming obvious.

"Maybe she doesn't need her career anymore."

"Meaning what?"

"My husband's position is political. He has enemies. You should know that. You're one of them. You find a way to get rid of your

enemies. He seems to have gotten rid of you by making you his ally. Any means can be acceptable."

"You want to tell me who his enemies are?"

"I don't keep up with them," she shrugged.

Hayes had hit on Jana a few times when she was single. She'd been a cop groupie but a groupie with a purpose. Hayes had held no real interest for her; anybody with half a brain could tell he was going to self-destruct. It was just too bad he hadn't figured it out himself.

"You don't smile much, do you, Jana?" Hayes observed. "I remember when you used to smile occasionally, but that was back when I could buy you a drink and make you laugh."

She didn't answer, so he filled the void with more words that he knew would needle her.

"What is it? You look pretty well off. You don't have much to smile about?"

She looked away and lit a cigarette.

"Hell, Jana, I knew you when you were partying down at The Carousel. You haven't changed that much. I used to wonder why you married Hanson, then I wondered why you stayed with him. I guess I still do."

Her head snapped around with sudden anger. Her expression told him she felt offended.

"He's my husband," she explained with a sudden rush of emotion. "We've been married for fifteen years. He's done so much for me. How the hell can you come into my home, our home, and ask something like that?"

Her indignation was lost on Hayes. As they say, he knew her when . . . Anyway, he had learned what he needed to know. She had a lot of reasons for supporting her husband, but she never said that she loved him. Maybe she didn't feel comfortable making such an admission to him. Maybe she didn't think it was any of his business, but she wasn't acting like a betrayed wife. She seemed like most people who had been around enough to not be surprised at the depth of the surrounding crap. She was composed, unperturbed, or maybe she just didn't give a damn. At any rate, this wasn't a loving family portrait, and that was more important than the contrived answers that she gave.

Flashing blue lights lit up Hayes's rearview mirror. They sent a chill through him, and being a former policeman didn't help. He moved over into the emergency lane as an unmarked car pulled up to his rear bumper.

He recognized the policeman from the old days, but he still kept his hands on the steering wheel in plain view. He remembered that from the old days as well.

"Waymon Hayes, fancy meeting you out here."

He was a tall man with one of those sculpted bodies that make even cheap suits look good.

"Don't tell me they've busted you down to traffic, Molina."

"Naw." Molina's laugh was humorless as he leaned forward to peer into the car. "I'm just delivering a message."

"You been following me?"

"Something like that. I just wanted to talk to you, Mr. Hayes."

The formality wasn't lost on Hayes. He had known Molina for years. He was not a friend, rather more of a benign acquaintance. Molina was a person whose intellect destined him to a career of limitations. He had been wise enough, however, to move through the ranks by making himself invaluable to others who had no such limits.

"So what can I do for you, Mr. Molina?" Hayes threw the formality right back at him.

"Chief Hanson's been good to me," Molina began. "I just want to make sure that you understand that everything isn't as it appears."

"You stopped me for this ignorance, Molina? Tell me something I don't know."

"I know a whore when I see one."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think?"

"Look, you're not bright enough to speak in parables, Molina. Either tell me something or get out of my face."

Molina's face puffed up and turned red. He bit his lip and clenched his fists as if trying to control himself.

Hayes looked away nonchalantly and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel impatiently.

"We through yet?" he asked.

"I never liked you, Hayes," Molina growled. "You're trash. You were a blight on the department. I don't know why Hanson picked you to do this, but if you screw up . . ."

"What?" Hayes abruptly interrupted. "What?"

Molina didn't answer, and Hayes left him there. He watched Molina in the rearview mirror as he drove away. He was still there as Hayes merged into traffic and disappeared.

He hadn't had the patience to listen to Molina's garbage. Molina didn't know anything but rumors and hearsay. He wasn't in tight enough to ever hear the real deal. Still there was a certain value in

rumor. He could deduce that there was a feeling that this woman wasn't squeaky clean. It would remain to be seen if that was true. Hayes understood that he wasn't being paid to find the truth, however. Hanson wanted someone who could make his problems go away, and if that included the truth, all well and good. If it didn't, getting rid of the problem came first.

The woman's name was Lynn Obanyon, a divorcée and a ten-year veteran. She had one of those cushy jobs that kept her out of harm's way. She was a special assistant and press liaison. The only thing cop about her was the uniform; otherwise she could have been any civilian doing an administrative job. The job placed her in constant contact with the chief of police. She traveled with him, arranged his conferences, and appeared at all of the photo ops. Anybody could see that there were liberal opportunities for mischief if that was desired.

Hayes wanted to get around the hearsay and go directly to the source, but it was impossible. He couldn't find the woman. Hell, he couldn't even find her lawyer. There was an obvious and calculated effort being made to avoid him.

Hayes watched John Bias's car leave his building's underground parking lot and head north on Peachtree Street. The black Porsche Carrera accelerated smoothly, weaving from lane to lane, almost inadvertently losing Hayes's aging Taurus attempting to shadow it.

He was barely in time to see the Porsche turn into a parking lot adjacent to a Buckhead restaurant. Damn lawyers. They always did business at these two-hundred-dollar luncheons, then wrote it off like it was a real business expense. Hayes accelerated, then screeched to a halt in a no-parking zone directly in front of the restaurant. When challenged by the doorman, he flashed a badge too quickly for the man to discern and proceeded to accost Bias in the parking lot.

"No way in hell!" Bias protested. "Why in the hell would I let my client talk to you?"

"You know I'm going to get what I want, counselor. You can't keep her hidden forever. I can talk to her in your presence or I can catch her alone somewhere and talk to her one on one."

"You do that and . . ."

"And what, counselor? What is it you think you can do to me?"

Hayes stared at the man intensely. He knew it would unnerve him, and he was right. He made a living on playing mind games. Bias looked away, and Hayes knew he had him.

"Look, Hanson's not getting away with this. Even you won't save

him. He did what he did. If he's righteous, he can prove it in court."

"And if he's not?"

Bias hesitated and didn't answer. Hayes knew he hadn't expected the question.

"What happens if he's not righteous?" Hayes repeated.

"I don't need to be discussing this with you." Bias attempted to leave.

"That's it, isn't it, counselor? You don't want him to be righteous. You want him to deal."

Bias started toward the restaurant.

"That deal might be hard to make with a whore on your hands."

He threw Molina's term at Bias to see what it would buy.

"You have no right to call her that."

"Was she screwing Hanson?"

Bias didn't answer right away. "Why don't you ask him?" he finally replied.

"Suppose he says yes. Makes it a little different, doesn't it. You never know about a woman scorned."

"Is he going to say yes?" Bias suddenly seemed willing to talk.

"Maybe he won't have to."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Jana Hanson seems pissed. She's standing by her man, but she seems to have something on her mind. I just wonder what it is. Oh, I'm sorry, I'm holding you up. You've got a client waiting. I shouldn't be so selfish."

Hayes started back to his car laughing to himself. He was such a flagrant manipulator.

"Mr. Hayes," the voice he had been expecting called out. "Why don't you take my card. I'm going to be tied up here for about an hour, but maybe we should talk later."

Hayes took the card and smiled disarmingly. He even shook the lawyer's hand. He didn't even want the card. He went back to his car and waited for Bias to finish.

Hayes followed the Porsche as it headed a few miles south on the interstate before exiting on the Lakewood Freeway heading for East Point. As he realized where Bias was going, he brought his Taurus to a screeching halt and skidded onto a side street adjacent to a steel fence topped by barbed wire. The son of a bitch was as slick as they came. What better place to hide someone than a guarded complex in the middle of a suburb with unmatched security. He watched the uniformed guards speak briefly to Bias before waving him through the gate. Fort McPherson Army Base, Forces Command Headquarters, home

of the Third Infantry—this was not going to be a walk in the park.

Candace Washington was legally blind and confined to a wheelchair. She was a retired army nurse who did her shopping and received her medical care at the base facilities. Hayes had gotten her wayward son out of a few scrapes, and she owed him. Her ID card and a handicapped sticker got him a temporary pass as her escort. Once inside, he dropped her off at the base hospital where one of her old buddies would arrange to take her back home.

Lynn Obanyon was nothing like Hayes had expected. He watched her from a distance and observed that she carried herself with a reserved, almost timid demeanor. There was none of the self-absorbed arrogance he had expected from someone with the reputation of being a departmental whore.

She had been staying with a family on officers' row. Hayes watched the house undisturbed. An occasional military police vehicle cruised through the neighborhood without challenging him. There was a presumptive conception that if a person passed through gate security, then they were supposed to be there.

She stayed close to the family with whom she was living and only ventured out of the house when accompanied by the officer's wife. Her excursions were to the PX, the day care center, the officers' club, and other facilities but none beyond the confines of the base. All of his chicanery at sneaking onto the base was in vain. There would be no approaching her in this compound. The military police would be on him before he could utter a single word. He would have to flush her out. She would have to come to him.

Hayes remained relatively secluded until nightfall. The base's activity declined into nothingness as darkness arrived. The residential areas appeared virtually deserted. It was three A.M. when he approached the house. Since residential crime is nonexistent on a military base, the locks on the homes represented no impediment whatsoever. Hayes opened the front door as quickly as if he had a key. He moved slowly with excruciating tedium through the living room and hallway to the bedrooms. The first room that he entered was the woman's room. She slept peacefully, her breathing quiet and unlabored. He felt guilty about what he was about to do and how it would fracture her life, but it was necessary.

He stood over the bed gazing at the sleeping figure in the soft glow of a night-light. He pointed the camera at her and prayed that the wink of the flash wouldn't awaken her. He left the Polaroid print on the pillow next to her and crept away.

Womack Street extended westward adjacent to the barbed wire-topped chain-link fence surrounding the military base. It was a narrow street even more crowded by the parked cars that squeezed in from both sides. The houses were modest single-family structures whose sparse lawns sloped into the bare dirt shoulders of the street. It was a place cloaked by its ordinary appearance, leaving it generally unnoticed by casual observers. Hayes had parked between two other nondescript, unwashed vehicles and waited for all hell to break loose.

The Porsche barreled up to the base's entrance followed by two official-looking but unmarked cars. They picked their way past the cars of arriving civilian employees and were waved through immediately. Thirty minutes later, the Porsche and one of the other cars exited the base. The woman was inside. Hayes eased his car into traffic and followed the cars as they made their way to the interstate and sped north.

The attorney had found another compound. Hayes could imagine the mayhem that must have followed when the woman realized that the base's security had been violated—and that some intruder had entered her room while she was in a state of utter vulnerability and had the audacity to leave proof of his violation.

The new safe house was in a gated community. Amateurs, Hayes thought. The base was a hundred times more impenetrable if it had been used properly. The lawyer had apparently not made any formal attempt to use the military's security. He had simply stashed the woman with a friend and assumed she would be safe. This place with its rent-a-cops was more to Hayes's liking.

Hayes flashed a police badge at the guard and was waved through the entrance without scrutiny. He turned down a side street and circled around the unmarked car left parked close to the entrance.

The house itself was one of those expensive structures crowded on a relatively small lot which allowed the builder to maximize his profits from the subdivision. It was surrounded by a stucco-covered concrete privacy fence built more to obscure curious eyes than for security. Its gated entry required a security code, but what the hell, a person could climb over the wall without much effort.

Bias finally left, apparently leaving instructions for the unmarked car to remain on the street between the house and the entrance to the subdivision.

Hayes smiled inwardly as darkness fell. One of Bias's men walked around the outside perimeter of the house. Bias's efforts

had been an exercise in futility. He was already inside.

Hayes waited in the shadows until he was sure there was no one in visual proximity to the exterior gate and rang the doorbell. Once again he was aided by fallacious assumptions. If he had passed the coded key pad, then he must have been cleared to enter the house.

He presented a legitimate business card to the woman who answered the door.

"Waymon Hayes, private investigator," she mused. "You're with Mr. Bias."

It was another unwarranted assumption, but Hayes nodded the expected confirmation.

"I need to speak with Ms. Obanyon," he said. "Is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

"Sure, I'll bring her to the study." The woman smiled and pointed to an open door to the left of the foyer.

Hayes waited with his back to the door. This was going too well. Quite some time had passed since he had been on the police force, but he couldn't be absolutely sure that he wouldn't be recognized.

He listened to the approaching footsteps, but he still didn't turn.

"I'll give you two some privacy," the woman who had greeted him announced, and he heard the door to the study close.

A wave of panic rippled across the young woman's face when he turned. He was certain that she didn't know him, but some people have premonitions. Trapped animals know instinctively when a predator is near. She took a step back toward the door. He moved closer to her, and it must have been clear that he would intercept her before she could reach the door.

"Please, don't hurt me," she pleaded in a soft whimper.

"I don't hurt people," he said in as soothing a tone as he could muster. He added "anymore" in his mind, but the words never made it to his lips.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You've got my card."

"What do you want?"

"Information. I want to give some, and I want to get some."

"I don't understand."

"You're never going to get the money," Hayes said.

"What?"

"Jana Hanson is pissed. She's gonna sue you."

"You're working for her?" she asked.

"I'm working for me," Hayes answered obliquely. "You don't hear much talk about alienation of affection these days, but it's still a legitimate basis for civil relief."

"This is a criminal proceeding. I happen to be the victim," she said.

"Yeah, but you've been involved with Hanson for months, and that's why she's going after you." He delivered the words with an air of calm certainty as if they were beyond being challenged.

The woman stopped talking. Her chin trembled slightly. She was one of those people who couldn't think and talk at the same time. Hayes just watched her, smugly self-assured with his well-honed art of undaunted lying.

"Look, everybody knows you had a relationship with Hanson."

"There isn't any proof . . ."

She stopped her words abruptly. They hadn't been the right words. They weren't innocent words. They were defensive words.

"I'm a private investigator," Hayes continued. "I take pictures. I listen."

Half truths, lies—they were better weapons than guns. He watched her squirm. He really didn't need any more, but he was greedy.

"That's how they got you, isn't it? They knew. So why not make a little money during the process. Sweet deal—finger Hanson and get paid too. Too bad you won't be able to keep the money. One look at those pictures, and the judge is gonna sign your bank account right over to Jana. Sorry to disturb you, Ms. Obanyon. I've got to go."

Hayes turned and walked toward the door.

"What can I do?"

He stopped without turning around. He didn't want her to see his smile. He had played this game so often, it was routine.

"You've got my card," he answered. "Use it."

They. There was always a they in the picture. They seemed to be responsible for most of the ills of the world, and it was always hell trying to figure out who they were. Lynn Obanyon knew who they were. John Bias knew who they were too. He might even have been one of them.

When Waymon walked out of the front gate of that house, he knew that the world had changed. Bias's people stared at him with open-mouthed amazement, but they didn't know what to do. Waymon Hayes often voiced the expression You've got to bring some to get some. He didn't really have to voice it. It was in

his swagger. Bias's men stood by passively and watched him all the way to his car.

"Apparently it was never intended that you should go to court over this sexual harassment charge. This was a ploy calculated to get you out of office. Obanyon was picked because everybody knew you were having an affair with her. She had nothing to lose because they were paying her, and her relationship with you wasn't going anywhere. You don't think she really believed that you might leave Jana for her, do you?"

"Who was she working for?"

The question was emotionless. Hanson had the pragmatic persona of a man who had grown weary of life's lack of surprises.

"Other than John Bias, I don't know. You tell me."

The list was a hodgepodge of people he had pissed off over the years—politicians and city, county, and state officials. The list read like a political who's who.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Hayes asked.

"Confirm who's involved and report back to me."

"From this usual list of suspects? Hell, the only surprise here is who isn't on the list. This is a waste of my time. What happens next?"

"Then I'll tell you what to do."

Hayes had to choke back his resentment of Hanson's arrogance. He wished that he didn't need the money so he could tell Hanson what to kiss. Hanson was not to be trusted. He was a vindictive bastard who had a hatred for life in general. He was going to punish his enemies, and if someone else got caught in the middle . . . oh, well. Hayes knew one essential truth: he was not going to be the man in the middle no matter how much money Hanson flashed.

"You're under arrest!"

Hayes stopped dead in his tracks at the sound of the gruff voice. They had been waiting for him outside his apartment.

"What the hell for?"

"Breaking and entering was still a crime in this city the last time I checked," the man growled.

He twisted one of Hayes's arms toward his back and handcuffed him, while a second plainclothes officer with a prominently displayed weapon glared at him menacingly.

"Go on. Resist me just a little bit. Make my day." The first officer taunted him while securing the handcuffs, then covered his eyes with a blindfold.

It didn't make sense that he would be arrested while working for the police chief, and this damn sure wasn't standard police procedure. Hayes kept his mouth shut and lay quietly on the floor of the car's backseat, where they had deposited him. It didn't take a genius to figure out that they weren't on their way to the police station.

They had traveled for about twenty minutes when the car paused momentarily, then moved forward slowly before coming to a stop again. There was a mechanical sound like a garage door closing but noisier than most of the ones he had heard. When they removed his blindfold, he could at least recognize something of his surroundings. It looked like an old warehouse. Converting them into condominiums had become the rage in Atlanta. Its lower level had been converted into individual garages for the lofts that were still in the process of being constructed.

Hayes was ushered into a room and shoved into a chair facing three men seated in shadow at a table about thirty feet away. Their faces were obscured in the dim light, and he didn't recognize the speaker's voice.

"You're interfering in something that doesn't concern you, Mr. Hayes. I've brought you here to ask you to cease and desist."

"Who are you?"

It was a foolish question, and Hayes really didn't expect an answer.

"Knowing my identity would serve no purpose other than to become a danger to your life," the voice replied. "What is important is what will happen if you do not cease."

"What's that?" Hayes asked. Something inside compelled him to jerk people's chains no matter what the personal danger was.

"I think this conversation is over, Mr. Hayes. Consider yourself warned."

Hayes was snatched harshly from the chair and shoved back toward the door. After entering the garage, he was blindfolded again and pushed to the floor of the car's backseat.

Renaissance. He had only seen the word for a fleeting second. It was on a brochure lying in the clutter of construction litter on the floor of the garage. It caught his eye just as they replaced the blindfold. Renaissance. Maybe it was something. More likely it was nothing, but it was all he had.

"Renaissance? Renaissance Hotel? Renaissance Apartments?" Hanson struggled with the name in an effort to help identify the location Hayes had described.

"I don't know," Hayes replied. "Wherever it was, it was in the downtown business district, and the construction seemed incomplete. There was still construction debris around. Looked like an old warehouse. You better figure it out fast, Hanson, because these were bad customers, and they've got some of your cops in their pocket."

"Renaissance Lofts!" Hanson interjected. That's got to be it. They're gonna be high-end condo complexes when they're finished. I'll send some people over there to check it out."

"Are you crazy?" Hayes interrupted. "Weren't you listening? Who are you gonna trust? You're paying me. I'll take care of it, but my fee just went up. As of now, I'm on hazardous duty pay."

The Renaissance Lofts wasn't a difficult location to identify once the name was known. Was it chosen because it was under construction and access was simple, or was there another connection? Hayes chose to pursue the latter. This immersed him in the unexciting task of chasing paper, an item unimaginably difficult to trap. The Renaissance was managed by a small company called Monarch that was owned by yet another company. The company of record, however, was a subsidiary of a company which had merged several years ago with a larger firm. The paper trail seemed endless, but this was part of the job, and it became enormously more interesting when a familiar name emerged.

Paglia. Nelson Paglia. New York City. Big-time evil. Hayes didn't just need hazardous duty pay. He needed an army.

One day passed, then another. Those days were long and arduous. Hayes spent them slouched in the front seat of his car watching policemen enter and exit various precincts until he saw the one he wanted. He followed the man cautiously and eventually knocked on the front door of his home. The time for being nice had passed. If the mob was involved, his life was on the line, and if he had to risk his life, so would everybody else.

The man's eyes almost bugged out of his head when he opened the door and saw Waymon Hayes.

"What do you want?" he asked nervously.

"I want to come in, Detective Martin. I got your name from the precinct captain once I recognized you."

Hayes pushed past the startled man and entered the living room of laughing children and Wal-Mart toys. This was the man who had cuffed him and dragged him to the Renaissance, and this was a different world. His wife looked up surprised by Hayes's unexpected entry.

"Let's talk outside," Martin suggested.

"I don't want to talk outside," Hayes replied loud enough for his family to hear.

Martin's wife approached them apprehensively and stood next to her husband.

"Who is this, Carl? What's this about?"

"Just police business," Carl explained.

"It's about your husband and the Renaissance Lofts," Hayes informed her. "It's about sexual harassment and intimidation. It's about organized crime and Nelson Paglia."

"Don't do this. If you don't get the hell out of here, I'll see that you pay for this."

"Shut the hell up," Hayes snarled. He stepped closer to Martin and brushed back his coat, revealing his gun. "You're gonna tell me what I want to know, and you're gonna do it now. Start talking, and if you threaten me again, I'll shoot your ass right here in front of your wife and kids."

"Oh, my God!" Martin's wife screamed. "I'm calling the police."

"Take this card. It's Chief Hanson's private line. You can call him directly. You know, bypass all of that 911 crap. Go ahead. Call him."

Martin's wife hesitated as if unsure of what to do with the business card Hayes was handing her.

"No!" Martin protested loudly.

He grabbed his wife's arm to restrain her.

"We can work this out, can't we?" he pleaded. "You and the kids go in another room. Just let me and Mr. Hayes talk for a minute."

His wife fearfully and reluctantly retreated but remained within eyesight.

"You know who these people are," Martin said. "If I talk to you, they'll kill me."

"You think your life means anything to me?" Hayes asked. His voice was cold and emotionless. "Your life was over when you decided to play this game. What's the mob got to do with this? Why do they care about Obanyon and this little game she's playing with her married boyfriend?"

Martin took a deep breath and sighed, apparently resigned to the fact that he was in over his head, and he was going to lose no matter what.

"The chief won't lighten up on his clubs."

"That strip club crap?"

"Yeah. It's big money. Paglia's nephew runs the clubs down here. The mayor was going to lift his liquor license to put him out of business."

"I thought all of that stuff was on hold for the time being. It hasn't been on the news for months."

"Right," Martin agreed. "The mayor and the city council bounced the liquor license thing back and forth, and then it just sort of went away. It went away because Paglia paid the mayor's office to make it go away."

This time it was Hayes's turn to take a deep breath and a step backward.

"The chief wouldn't let it go," Martin continued. He's got people down there screwing with the place or its customers almost every night."

Hayes understood exactly what Martin meant. Hanson was an ass, but he was righteous ass, at least when it came to some things. Hanson firmly believed that organized crime couldn't be allowed in the city in any way, shape, or form. If the city tolerated the club, then it would have to tolerate the prostitution, drug distribution, money laundering, and any other criminal activity that went with it. So he made it his business to bust Paglia's people on any ordinance he could find violated. Public nudity, drugs, public drunkenness, DUI—any employee or customer who gave him an excuse got busted.

"So Paglia put Obanyon up to doing a number on Hanson?"

"Paglia just facilitated things. He didn't know anything about the politics down here."

"So who gave the order?"

"Who do you think?"

"The mayor?"

"You're not as dumb as you look."

"You know, I would kick your ass, but why bother. You probably won't be alive tomorrow this time."

Hayes left Martin there. He felt sorry for his wife and kids, but he had put himself in that position.

"Don't burn me on this," Martin yelled at him. "Don't burn me on this!"

Hayes kept walking. All Martin could hope for was that whatever happened would be quick.

Hanson had been surprised that his enemies included the mayor. His only consolation might have been that it wasn't personal, as with most of his enemies. The mayor was a weak man, and he surrounded himself with lesser men whose common interest was greed.

In the end the mayor would get what he wanted. Hanson was in a box. Embroiled in a scandal and a legal threat, he had no friends

and no support. His best option was to resign. Since the harassment threat was only a feint, his resignation would probably make it all go away.

Hanson walked with his shoulders slumped. He looked like a broken man—a man with no fight left in him. It was exactly what everybody wanted.

Hayes's phone rang, and he listened to it passively. He didn't want to answer it. All he wanted was his money and to get as far away from the sleaze as he could.

"You watching the news?" the feminine voice asked. It was a voice that never called him. It was a surprise and not necessarily pleasant.

"It looks like somebody finally gave my husband some good advice," Jana Hanson said.

"It wasn't me," Hayes answered.

"You might have had something to do with it," she continued. "Anyway, I just wanted to thank you."

"Don't thank me. He didn't have much choice, with a New York mobster financing a legal campaign against him, and the mayor hanging him out to dry."

"New York mobster?" She repeated the phrase as if it was a question.

"Nelson Paglia paid Obanyon to do a number on your husband."

"Does he know that?" she asked.

"He knows everything," Hayes replied. "One thing I learned about your husband from my past dealings with him is that he's a vindictive son of a bitch. There's probably not much he can do about Paglia, but I'd hate to be in Obanyon's shoes. If you two have anything left, keep him close. He's got enough juice to come back from this if he doesn't do something stupid and finish himself off."

She was silent for a while. Then she thanked Hayes profusely for his efforts. They hadn't been friends, but they hadn't been enemies either. He wished her the best.

"You bastard! He's not going to get away with this! You're not going to get away with this!"

It was John Bias's voice, and he was livid. Bias was a man who would never stoop to calling someone like him. Hell, Bias was so damned important that calls never got through to him unless they carried a title as an introduction. It was almost unimaginable that Bias would call his office.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Hayes replied.

"There are too many witnesses," Bias continued. "Everybody knows you were stalking her. Everybody knows about your little stunt at Fort McPherson. Back off, or else."

"I don't know what you mean," Hayes protested. "I really don't. What has happened?"

There was silence on the other end of the phone. He could hear Bias breathing, so he knew he was still there.

Bias was genuinely distraught. Lynn Obanyon had disappeared. Someone had been stalking her again. The stalker had gotten close enough to try to grab her. The terrified woman had escaped, but after placing a desperate call to her attorney, she had disappeared.

Hayes cringed at the thought of what might be happening. Hanson was truly vindictive, but he wasn't a moron. He would wait for an advantageous time and then try to punish her where it would hurt—her checkbook. Physical abuse and murder weren't his bag.

Hayes's immediate concern was the position in which his involvement had placed him. If anything happened to the woman, he would be a prime suspect.

He made his best case to Bias in hopes it would persuade him that he had no involvement in this.

Bias softened. He didn't have much choice. Hayes agreed to meet him. Hanson wasn't much of a threat, but Hayes knew who was.

They walked into the Glass Slipper. The place was jumping, and it was only noon. It was a place of loud music and bare flesh served with a generous helping of fried food, not that customers came for the cuisine.

Joey Paglia was Nelson Paglia's nephew and the front man for the family's Southern strategy. Hayes had crossed Joey's path a few times but never in conflict.

Joey raised both hands and backed away in an exaggerated response to Hayes's inquiry.

"We got no interest in that," Joey protested. "Think about it. Why would we need that kind of heat? What would it get us? So what if she shoots off her mouth? Everybody knows we buy people. She's paid. She's got no reason to fear us or call our name. We got no beef with Obanyon. If somebody's trying to hurt her, you better look closer to home."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Bias asked.

"I got nothing else to talk to you gentlemen about. I'll call somebody to show you out."

Bias tried to ask another question, but Hayes pulled him away.

They were being dismissed, and it didn't pay to press a man like Joey Paglia. He could make people disappear and not lose a minute of sleep over it.

"Where would she go?" Hayes asked. "She's trying to run—trying to hide. Where would she go that was fairly safe, that no one knew about?"

"I don't know," Bias replied. "I've checked all of the places we've used before, friends, relatives. It's like she's been swallowed up. Though there may still be one place . . ." he mused. They jumped in the car and sped south.

The Renaissance Lofts. The unfinished building had been Obanyon's intended home. It was where she had invested some of the money she had been paid to falsely finger Atlanta's chief of police. That's why the structure had been chosen, and that's where she had probably sought refuge in hopes that no one would suspect that she was staying at an unfinished work site.

Hayes coaxed his car through the late evening traffic. The pace was agonizingly slow. A sense of urgency forced him to weave between lines of cars, leaving a string of profanity-spewing drivers in his wake.

The street leading to the Renaissance was almost empty. Few people had reasons to venture into this relatively deserted area except construction crews. Suddenly, a black car with darkly tinted windows barreled past them barely avoiding a collision. Hayes screeched to a halt.

"Get in there," he yelled to Bias. "Nobody's got any reason to drive that fast back here."

He swerved into a U-turn as soon as Bias got out. Nobody was going anywhere in this traffic. The only thing a person could do was to work his way back to the interstate. Even the interstate was a parking lot going north. The best chance for making a fast getaway was either south or west, and he was closer to the westbound highway.

Hayes spotted the car trapped in the center lane of a one-way street two blocks from the westbound freeway. He left his car on the side street and walked up the line of stalled traffic. Startled motorists gawked at Hayes who casually moved past them with a drawn pistol in full view. He could see the cell phones popping into drivers' hands all around him. The police would be there in minutes.

The window on the driver's side lowered as he approached. He trained his pistol on the driver's head. The man turned slowly toward him.

"Jesus Christ!" Hayes exclaimed. "You dumb son of a bitch! What

did you do back there? I thought Hanson was smarter than that."

"Hanson had nothing to do with this. I was trying to help him. I was trying to save him."

"By hurting that girl?"

Molina sat there silently as the wail of sirens sang in the background.

"I couldn't let her spill her guts."

A cold chill washed over Hayes as he began to realize that Molina may have done something dreadful.

"About what?" Hayes asked.

"About who paid her to finger the chief."

"Paglia. That's not news."

"Paglia wouldn't touch this directly. You can call his name, but you can't touch him. Jana Hanson bought that girl. You ought to be able to figure out why. She's been in Paglia's pocket for years. How do you think she financed that string of boutiques that made her rich? Hot money. That's how they work. They call in favors, and you got to do their bidding."

The sirens became louder. Hayes slipped his gun back into his holster as the flashing lights appeared in the distance. The traffic wasn't going anywhere, and neither was Molina. There was nowhere to run for a middle-aged cop when there was somebody who knew his name and what he had done. There was a loud pop as Hayes walked away. He didn't bother to stop to see its source.

Lynn Obanyon died in the loft that she had hoped would be her refuge. Her death started a descent into hell for Jana Hanson, who had lost her husband to another woman and lost her soul to greed and revenge.

John Bias cared about Lynn Obanyon more than he should have. That was unusual for the attorney of celebrities. Maybe he was touched by her unfortunate choices and the futility of her predicament. He knew the story but had no proof. He assuaged his pain by leaking his suspicions to federal authorities who had the will and the tenacity to rattle a house of cards until it fell.

Alger Hanson resigned from the police force, but the mayor was defeated in the next election, rendering his sacrifice a moot issue.

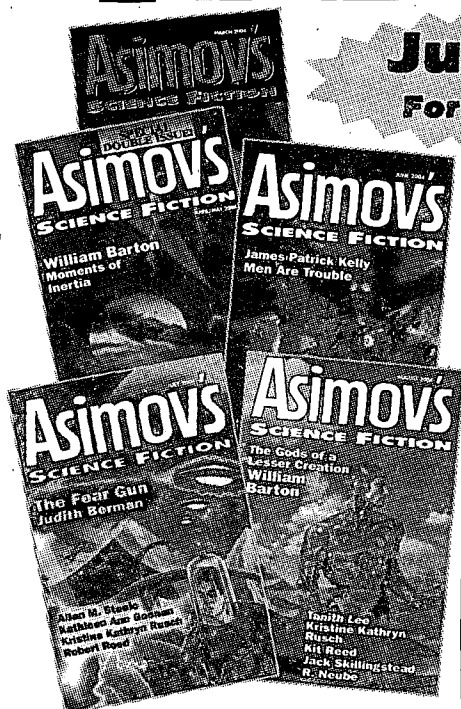
The Paglias closed their strip clubs and moved their operations back to New York, but they couldn't escape the song Jana Hanson sang in her failing attempt to save herself.

In the end it wasn't the political intrigues that mattered. It was Alger Hanson's betrayal of his wife and a wounded heart that initiated a cascade of blood that would drown them all. ♣

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LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING



“A disaster, that’s what it is,” wailed Ima Renton.

“You phoned about a murder?” inquired Sheriff Will Ketchall, anxious to start his investigation that Sunday morning.

“That’s what I mean,” continued Mrs. Renton. “My Happy Days Resort has a spotless reputation. And now one of my guests lies murdered in Sleep Well cottage.”

“Just show me the scene, ma’am.”

The distraught owner led the way and pointed. The woman sprawled on the bed was definitely murdered, stabbed through the heart. Her red dress was stained with blood. “Okay,” said Ketchall, taking charge, “who discovered her?”

“I—I did, when I went to change the sheets. Poor woman was all alone last night. Her husband was called away on business.”

“Rigor mortis pretty advanced. Probably was dead before midnight. Any strangers about last night?”

“I’m reasonably sure no one drove up the mountain road, sir,” she answered. “I’m a very light sleeper.”

“So, it was probably one of the other renters. Let me see your registration cards.”

They returned to the office. “Here they are, Sheriff,” said Mrs. Renton. “The six couples arrived on different days last week, starting Monday, and each paid for two weeks in advance.”

As Ketchall thumbed through the cards he gave a low whistle. He recognized the name of each husband as an ex-con on parole! One had served time for extortion. “Tell me about these guests of yours, Mrs. Renton,” he said.

“Oh, very well, sir. One couple is named Lambert. One wife is named Cathy, and one husband is named Ralph. Each wife wears a different colored dress; I presume she launders it at night. Each gentleman has a different colored necktie.”

From her account the sheriff learned further that:

1. Quint arrived the day after Mr. Holmes and the day before Dora’s husband. They do not include the man from South Carolina, the man with the red tie, or the husband of the wife in the yellow dress.

2. Mrs. Garrels (who arrived exactly three days before Edith) is not the lady from Virginia, the wife of the cocaine dealer, or the lady in blue (who did not arrive Friday).
3. The six men include Mr. Holmes (who is neither the man from Wisconsin nor the one who arrived Monday), the cocaine dealer, the man married to the woman in the orange dress, the two men wearing the orange and polka dot ties, and Alice's husband (who is neither Martin nor the man from Virginia).
4. Flora arrived the day after Mrs. Immel and the day before Oscar's wife. The other three women are the burglar's wife (who was not the last to arrive), the woman in purple (whose husband didn't wear the green necktie), and the one from Tennessee (who arrived the day after the woman from Utah).
5. Mr. Johnson arrived the day after Norbert. Neither man is the arsonist or the ex-con from Texas.
6. Peter arrived the day after Betty's husband and the day before Mr. Kilmer (who isn't married to Flora). They do not include the man with the yellow tie, the forger, or the man from Wisconsin (who didn't come on Tuesday).
7. The six men include Mr. Kilmer, the dynamiter, the forger, the men wearing the green and the blue ties, and Oscar (who did not arrive on Saturday).
8. The man in the polka dot tie arrived more than one day after the man whose wife wore the green dress.
9. The dynamiter arrived the day before the forger.

Ketchall rounded up the guests in residence. "One of you men," he declared gravely, "has definitely broken his parole. Have any of you a statement to make?"

They glumly remained silent.

It was then that the sheriff spotted a small bloodstain on one suspect's red tie. "You evidently overlooked one thing," he said as he made the arrest. "But it's enough for a conviction!"

Who fatally stabbed whom at Happy Days Resort?

The answer will appear in the November issue.
See page 134 for the solution to the September puzzle.

THE CASE OF THE UNFORTUNATE FORTUNE COOKIE

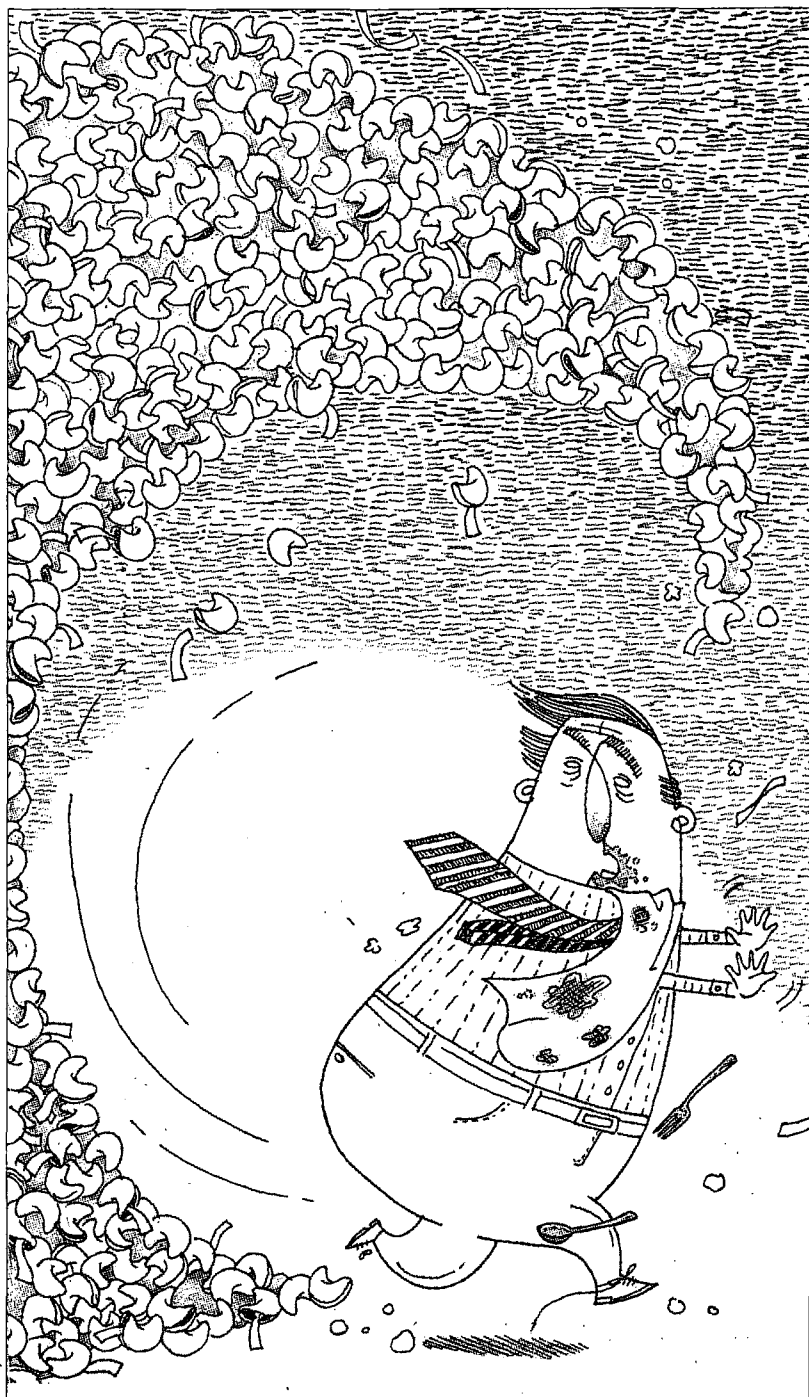
STEVE HOCKENSMITH

A brief silence fell over the table as the waiter went off to get the check, and Burt planned to make use of it.

The silence wasn't so much a lull in the conversation as a lull in the lecture. As was his way, Burt's friend Raymond had been talking almost nonstop ever since they'd met in front of the Golden Dragon Restaurant fifty minutes before. Raymond wasn't just a Renaissance man. He was an Enlightenment, Atomic Age, and Post-Modern man, as well. He knew—or pretended to know—just enough about absolutely everything to dominate any social interaction he might have.

He talked about baseball as they were led to their table. He talked about the films of Francois Truffaut as they looked over the menu. He talked about the films of Don Knotts as they waited for their hot and sour soup. And from the first bite of their appetizers through the last bite of their entrees, he talked about Albert Einstein, chaos theory, chess, Hungry Hungry Hippos, the Republican Party, the Spanish Inquisition, Norman Mailer, Norman Fell, the Norman conquest, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and the proper way to poach an egg.

The facts, figures, and quotations spewed out so fast Burt's ears could barely catch it all. Burt strongly suspected that much of what Raymond said was bunk, but he could never get a word in edgewise to say so. The only times he was allowed to speak came when Raymond decided to take a bite. But even then Raymond controlled the conversation, asking Burt a question before shoveling a few forkfuls of kung pao shrimp or General Tso's chicken into his mouth.



So, Burt—how's the baby?

Enjoying the new job?

Still thinking about moving to Mexico?

How'd the skin grafts go?

Doing alright with the artificial leg?

Any more trouble with those Japanese gangsters?

Burt felt that some of his answers to these questions were pretty interesting—maybe even downright fascinating. But he never got more than five words into them before Raymond was off again.

"Yeah, those Yakuza guys gave you a pretty rough time—but you should've seen what the Reds did to the Braves last night! I don't think there's been an upset that shocking since the Turks sank the Duke of Medina's armada off Tripoli in 1560! There's an interesting story behind that, by the way. You see, the Duke suffered from a morbid fear of dachshunds, and the Turks knew it, so . . ."

Eating lunch with Raymond was like watching someone else channel surf. You never knew what was going to pop up next.

But now Burt was going to make a grab for the remote control.

"You know what annoys me?" he said, and there was no pause after he said it. He was far too smart to wait for an answer. "Fortune cookies. They used to actually tell you your fortune. 'You will meet a tall, dark stranger.' 'You will receive an important letter.' Stuff like that. Nowadays all you get are compliments or pseudo-Confuciusy truisms. 'You have many friends.' 'An open heart is a happy heart.' That kind of thing. It really—"

"There's a reason for that," Raymond cut in, and he didn't need an "Oh?" or a "Tell me" from Burt to continue. He just did.

Burt didn't mind. He was basking in the glory of his achievement. He'd managed to slip a thought into the conversation, in the process blurting out the most consecutive words he'd spoken in Raymond's presence since 1993. And now his reward would be an explanation for one of life's little mysteries. He'd decide later if he believed it.

Burt settled back into the plush booth he and Raymond were sharing and listened.

There used to be this famous defense attorney named Terry Dixon (Raymond said). The man never lost a case. He once had a client who was found passed out in a hotel bed with a bloody axe in his hands and the bits and pieces of his wife stuffed in the pillowcase under his head—and Dixon got the guy off. It turned out

the maid who'd called the cops did it. Dixon picked up on two things no one else noticed: She'd come into the room despite the DO NOT DISTURB sign hanging from the doorknob, and the welcome mints smelled of almonds. He threw that at her on the stand, and she just fell apart—broke down and admitted everything. The last time the couple had stayed at the hotel they'd stolen enough towels to start their own Turkish bath, and the maid was out for revenge. She got the chair instead.

Anyway, Dixon used to do that kind of thing all the time. He was the king of lost legal causes. His bread and butter was accused murderers—used to save some poor slob's neck just about every week, it seemed like—but he handled civil cases on the side . . . if they were hopeless enough.

Now there was only one thing Dixon loved more than browbeating people into nervous breakdowns on the witness stand, and that was Chinese food. He ended up eating so much Szechwan and Mandarin he had to hire assistants to pull him around Chinatown in a wheelchair shaped like a little rickshaw. This was a few years before that, though, when he could still get up and down the buffet tables under his own power. But his obsession with sweet and sour shrimp and dim sum was already plenty famous. So it made perfect sense that the Fortunes would come to him.

The Fortunes, of course, invented what we know today as the "fortune cookie." Before the Fortune family came along, you'd get your bill in the cookie when you ate Chinese. That had to go when credit cards came in—no one could figure out a way to get carbon paper into a cookie without ruining it. But people still expected a tasteless, stale, folded-up wad of overbaked dough stuffed with *something* when they were done with their moo goo gai pan. The Fortunes dreamed up the fortunes, and it made them a fortune.

And that made them a target. This was long before frivolous lawsuits replaced baseball as the national pastime, but there are always bold men of vision who are ahead of their time, and one such man had found the Fortunes . . . and a lawyer. The man's name was Burl Oliver Butler, and this was his story.

One day, Butler was eating lunch at a restaurant very much like this one. When he finished his meal, the waiter brought the bill and a fortune cookie. Inside the cookie was this fortune: "Today is your lucky day." Overjoyed, Butler went straight to the bank, withdrew each and every penny in his possession, and proceeded from there to the dog track. There he bet everything he had on a greyhound named "Dogzilla." The race was a photo finish. Unfortunately for Butler, Dogzilla wasn't even in the picture—she finished fourteenth

out of a field of twelve. When Butler returned to work, he was immediately fired. He'd been a quality control inspector on a G.I. Joe assembly line, and while he was playing hooky at the races a misaligned mold had resulted in more than three thousand action figures that appeared to be so anatomically correct they were unsellable except as adult novelties. When Butler returned home and told his wife about his "lucky day," she flew into a rage and attacked him with the nearest weapon she could find. Butler only survived because that weapon was a grapefruit spoon, and though viciously *spooned* he lost no major organs and only one pint of blood. He did, however, lose a wife, for that very night she was committed to an institution for the criminally insane.

In short, it was not Burl Oliver Butler's lucky day. It was, in fact, the worst day of his life. In his suit against the Fortunes, he accused the family of fraud, false advertising, willful negligence, and infliction of emotional distress.

He was asking for one million dollars.

"We can't afford that!" Amos Fortune, the head of the Fortune family, told Dixon when he came to plead for the great lawyer's help. "We're comfortable, yes. Maybe even well off. But a million dollars? Mr. Dixon, the profit margin on a fortune cookie is one cent! *One measly cent!* Do you know how many cookies we'd have to sell to make up for that kind of loss?"

As rhetorical questions go, it was pretty weak.

"One hundred million," Dixon said.

"If you don't help us, we'll be ruined!" Fortune moaned. "We'll have to close down our factory, lay off our cookie rollers, our cookie folders, our cookie stuffers. And what about our customers—the Great Walls and Happy Pandas and Peking Gardens and Mr. Eggrolls of this great land of ours? What will they do? Serve *almond* cookies after a meal? Orange slices? Preposterous! There's only one way to end a fine Chinese meal, Mr. Dixon, and that's with a genuine Fortune family fortune cookie! Take those away, and you've dealt ethnic dining in America a blow from which it will never recover!"

"Enough!" Dixon bellowed. "I'll take the case!"

Dixon wasn't a huge fan of fortune cookies himself, since they took valuable stomach space from more important things like sauce-smothered shrimp and fried wontons stuffed with cream cheese. It was the principle of the matter he cared about. No one was going to dictate the terms on which he enjoyed Chinese food—*no one*.

"This time it's personal," he whispered to himself.

"It's always personal with you, ain't it?" said Saul Swann, the investigator Dixon used for dirt digging and keyhole peeping, when he heard about the case.

"We've only got one chance to win," Dixon said, ignoring the remark. "Cheap irony."

"I don't get you."

"Maybe Butler would've been shot in a stickup if he hadn't run out of that Chinese restaurant," Dixon explained patiently. "Maybe he would've been crushed by a crate of G.I. Joes if he'd been at the factory on time. Maybe one of the doctors cured him of a rare tropical disease when he came into the emergency room with that spoon sticking out of his—"

"Oh, I see. Maybe it really was his lucky day!"

Dixon nodded. "Get out there and prove it, Saul. Because if it wasn't Burl Oliver Butler's lucky day, this is my *unlucky* day . . . because I've just accepted my first losing case."

Two weeks later, Swann handed in his report.

"Dear Boss," it began, "you have just accepted your first losing case."

Swann had scoured Butler's life for signs of irony. He'd found none. Butler was just an ordinary schmo whose ordinary life had been extraordinarily screwed by bad advice from a pastry.

It was the night before the trial, and Dixon went out to his favorite Chinese restaurant and enjoyed what very well might be his final becooked Mandarin meal. His fortune was not helpful.

"This is your lucky day," it said.

Now there's cheap irony for you.

The trial did not go well. An astrologer testified that Butler's moon sign was in the house of Sagittarius on the day he received the cookie in question, meaning Butler—a Leo—was sure to have a *bad* day. Under intense badgering on the witness stand, Amos Fortune admitted that his family didn't employ a single psychic: The predictions they stuffed into their cookies were written by Fortune's fifteen-year-old niece. And as the coup de grâce, Butler's attorney called a surprise expert witness—the famed baking impresario Mrs. Fields, who told the shocked jurors that in her professional opinion fortune cookies weren't even cookies at all.

"Not . . . even . . . a . . . cookie!" Butler's lawyer intoned dramatically in his summation, his eyes already flashing with triumph. "You can't believe a thing these Fortune Cookies say! Perhaps they should be called *Lie Pies!* Or *Fake Cakes!*" He tossed a fortune cookie on the floor and began jumping up and down on it. "Here's how these cookies ought to crumble, ladies and gentlemen!"

Dixon was fond of courtroom theatrics himself. He'd given summations using hand puppets, interpretive dance, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and psychedelic drugs. But this was going too far. Or so he thought until the jury began applauding. Some of the jurors even leapt out of their chairs and began stomping cookie crumbs themselves.

Dixon got the uneasy feeling that the jury was not favoring the Fortunes. His first legal loss was at hand.

He turned to look at Burl Oliver Butler across the aisle. A bottle of champagne was already chilling in a bucket of ice at the man's feet, and behind him was a cooler of Gatorade which he no doubt planned to dump over his attorney's head when the jury's judgment was read. Butler noticed Dixon's scrutiny and gave him a broad wink. He looked utterly and completely confident.

And why shouldn't he? Dixon thought, choosing out of a sense of propriety not to return the wink. In a few minutes, he's going to be a millionaire.

In a flash, Dixon saw his mistake. He smacked his forehead so hard he concussed himself. As he sank into unconsciousness, he whispered his revelation to Saul Swann.

Swann stared back incredulously. "Alright, boss. If you think it'll help," he replied. He stood up and roared, "Somebody get this man a pair of ducks—and fast!"

But Swann had misunderstood. Dixon explained it to the jury the next day from his hospital bed. The bed was in the courtroom at the time, having been wheeled in for Dixon's summation. Of course, by that point Dixon felt well enough to do cartwheels, but he wasn't going to miss an opportunity to win a few sympathy points. His forehead was wrapped with gauze, a tangle of tubes ran from his arms to brightly colored bags dripping mysterious fluids, and three doctors and a nurse hovered by his side, all of them instructed to shake their heads and look troubled, as if any further trauma—such as, for instance, a defeat in the courtroom—would send Dixon spiraling toward death.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," Dixon croaked. He'd spent half the night sucking on saltines and swallowing unchewed Cracker Jacks in order to get the dry rasp just right. "This is really a simple case. Mr. Butler received a prophecy from one of my client's cookies, and he took action based on that prophecy. He now says that the prophecy was wrong, he suffered dire consequences as a result, and he is entitled to compensation. But I ask you . . . *was* the prophecy wrong?"

A low murmur arose from the packed courtroom, the only clearly

audible words being a half-whispered "Hell yes!" from one of the jurors.

"Think carefully, good people," Dixon chided the jury with a small, paternal smile. "The cookie told Mr. Butler that his lucky day had arrived. The day that followed *appeared* to be quite unlucky. Yet now, as a result of that, Mr. Butler might be given one . . . million . . . dollars. I don't know about you, but I'd call that pretty lucky. In fact, I'd say the day he got that fortune cookie was the luckiest day of his life . . . if you find in his favor."

The jurors all began rubbing their chins and furrowing their brows simultaneously.

"What we have here, ladies and gentlemen, is what's known as a *paradox*," Dixon went on, pausing just long enough to turn and raise an eyebrow at Saul Swann, who shrugged back apologetically. "If you decide the cookie was right, the cookie was wrong. But the second you decide the cookie was wrong, the cookie was right—and *you* were wrong! As Confucius once said, 'The fault lies not in our cookies, but in ourselves.' Truer words were never spoken. And do you want to know where I first encountered those words? *In a fortune cookie*. Thank you, my friends, and God . . . bless . . . Amer . . . ic . . . aaaaaah . . ."

Dixon swooned dramatically, and the jurors—who'd all taken to scratching their heads in unison—gasped as he collapsed into the spongy folds of his bed. While the judge and jury were distracted, one of Dixon's doctors pushed a button that created an alarming "beep-beep-beeeeeeeeeeeeeeep," and the medical team began pushing the lawyer's bed toward the exit shouting "Code purple! Code purple!" at no one in particular.

What the judge and jury didn't know was that "code purple" means "time for lunch," and Dixon was rushed, still in bed, to the nearest Chinese restaurant, where he was immediately revived by the smell of garlic sauce and hot mustard. Saul Swann showed up just as Dixon was polishing off a plate of sesame chicken.

"Have they reached a verdict?" asked a pale Amos Fortune. He and Dixon had been at the restaurant for nearly an hour by that time, but he'd been too nervous to eat anything more than one of his own cookies.

"Still deliberating," Swann reported. "And by *deliberating* I mean yelling, screaming, and clawing each other's eyes out. I tell ya', boss—that *paradox* of yours really did a number on 'em. The jury just sent a note out to the bailiff asking for aspirin, Alka-Seltzer, Pepto-Bismol, a hot water bottle, a cold compress, and six bottles of Southern Comfort."

Fortune looked like he could use all of the above himself. He buried his face in his hands and wept, but Dixon hardly even seemed to be listening. Instead, he was frowning at the slip of paper Fortune had removed from his cookie a moment before.

"You have many friends," it said.

"Who wrote this fortune, Fortune?" Dixon asked.

The cookie magnate wiped the tears from his eyes and glanced at the fortune in Dixon's hands.

"I did," he said. "We fired my niece. Her material was too edgy. Those predictions of hers got us into this mess, and the Chinese Anti-Defamation League was giving us trouble over the 'Confucius say' stuff we tried out. So I thought, Who's going to argue with a compliment?"

Dixon nodded, his thick, sesame-smears lips curling into a grin as he asked the question that would save the fortune cookie industry.

"Saul—has the jury had lunch?"

Half an hour later, a deliveryman arrived at the courthouse, bowlegged under the weight of box upon box of Chinese food.

"Compliments of the Mandarin Palace restaurant," the deliveryman told the bailiff. "With all the publicity this case is getting, business has tripled. The manager wants to show his appreciation."

Dixon had picked the most aromatic dishes the restaurant had to offer, knowing the sweet, spicy scent of orange beef and lemon chicken and walnut prawns would be more than anyone could resist—even a no-nonsense bailiff or an irritable, headachy juror swilling Pepto-Bismol straight from the bottle.

And Dixon was right. Minutes after the moveable feast was brought to the jury room, it was gone. And when the jury had licked up the last drop of sauce, they began cracking open their fortune cookies. Inside, they found the fortunes Dixon had hand-picked for them.

"People admire your looks, but they covet your brains," one said.

"Goodness flows from you like water from a spring," said another.

"Give advice freely—your wisdom is a treasure that grows with the giving."

"You possess great intelligence."

"You rock."

And so on.

Less than an hour later, Dixon, Fortune, and Swann were back in the courtroom to hear the verdict. The jury looked a little sleepy, having recently consumed vast quantities of MSG, but they also looked very pleased. They were smiling like twelve happy Buddhas—as were Dixon, Fortune, and Swann when they

walked back out of the courtroom a few minutes later.

As Dixon had hoped, the jury couldn't bring itself to declare that fortune cookie fortunes are pure malarkey—not when the last examples they'd seen were so obviously, demonstrably *true*.

"On behalf of the entire food service industry, I thank you," Fortune said, shaking Dixon's hand on the courthouse steps.

"Don't thank me, thank . . ." Dixon's face went blank for a second, then his grin returned. "Well, yes. You should be thanking me. Those fortunes of yours could've done some serious damage to a great American tradition—Chinese food. I hope you've learned your lesson."

"Oh absolutely!" Fortune replied. "A man with burned fingers knows not to play with fire. We're dumping the prophecies and predictions for good. It'll be nothing but platitudes and pleasantries from now on!"

"Good," Dixon said. "Now what say we celebrate over at the Sizzling Wok? They've got pot stickers there that'll melt in your mouth . . ."

The check had arrived when Raymond was barely a minute into his story, and it had sat before him on the table, untouched and apparently unnoticed, as he unwound the rest of his tale at a leisurely pace. As always, Raymond remained oblivious when the waiter returned once, twice, three times to hover quietly nearby. And, again as always, it was Burt who finally gave in and pulled out his wallet. Raymond acted as if he knew the story behind everything, but there was one explanation Burt had yet to hear—why his friend could never pick up a tab.

After throwing a couple of bills down on the table, Burt managed to get in a quick announcement: He was going to the restroom. This was the kind of input Raymond would actually allow, and he graciously paused while Burt slid out of the booth and walked toward the back of the restaurant. When Burt returned a few minutes later, Raymond launched right back into his tale without so much as an "As I was saying . . ."

"A man with burned fingers knows not to play with fire," Raymond said. "'We're dumping the prophecies and predictions for good . . .'"

Burt's change had arrived by then. With it were two plastic-wrapped fortune cookies. Burt picked one up and toyed with it as Raymond concluded his ludicrous story. It was the biggest load of shiitake mushrooms Raymond had ever shoveled his

way, and for once Burt planned to say so.

As Raymond was coming to the final few words of his yarn, Burt unwrapped his fortune cookie and broke it apart. "You know, Raymond," he planned to say. "I believe you about as much as I believe this fortune."

The fortune stopped him.

"A man with burned fingers," it read, "knows not to play with fire."

Burt heeded the cookie's advice and kept his doubts unvoiced, even when Raymond supplied the perfect setup by reading out his own fortune.

"You have a vivid imagination."

Burt figured if the fortune in his cookie meant anything, the story was true, which meant fortune cookies aren't even supposed to mean anything, which meant the fortune was false. If Raymond's fortune meant anything, the story was false—but only if Burt believed the fortune, and why should he do that if what it said was true, since it was implying that what it said was false?

Burt suddenly had a pounding headache. Yet he still managed to squeeze one more thought into the conversation before Raymond could spin off into another rambling round of free associations.

"Next time," Burt said, "let's go out for Italian." 🐼

Solution to the September "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Chattered

B. Anchovy

C. Ranches

D. Oyster stew

E. Lotteries

F. Yellowish

G. Nourished

H. Hot cakes

I. Awkward

J. Replenish

K. Throat

L. Forget

M. Inchworm

N. Neater

O. Elizabeth

P. Arithmetic

Q. Radishes

R. Timidly

S. Orthodox

T. Faulty

U. Mopped

V. Unhitched

W. Rotate

X. Devote

Y. Everywhere

Z. Rhapsody

QUOTATION

Author—CAROLYN (G.) HART

Work—(THE) FINE ART OF MURDER

(Edited by Ed Gorman, Martin H. Greenberg, and Larry Segriff, with Jon L. Breen)

"The traditional mystery doesn't have to do with crime; it has to do with relationships. In looking for . . . the murderer, the . . . detective explores the lives of [the characters]. . . [Readers can analyze] . . . why people do what they do, why hearts break, why murders occur."

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GERALD KERSH

INSCRUTABLE PROVIDENCE

It was rough on my poor friend Karmesin. Finding a pound note in his possession for the first time in two months, he rushed out and bought a hundred cigarettes, and received a bad half-crown in the change.

"Look," he said, holding the coin in his fat, white fingers. He pressed: the half-crown bent. "Lead!" said Karmesin. "I could make better myself. Swindlers! Trampers of the faces of the poor!"

"Take it back to the shop," I suggested.

"How am I to prove that it was the shopkeeper who gave it to me?" asked Karmesin. Then he laughed, and said: "Bah. It is all in the game. That shopkeeper would probably spit on the name of a pick-pocket, a forger, or an utterer of forged notes or coins.

"Yet let him receive a queer half-crown from a customer, and while that coin remains in his possession he is an enemy of society; his one desire is to pass it off on somebody else.

"Bah, I say! Let him keep it. He thinks he is smart, but God will punish him. I tell you, my friend, the great wrongdoer who knows good from evil stands a better chance of paradise than the smug citizen who slinks behind the skirts of the law to do petty misdeeds.

"I could keep this half-crown and pass it to some other unfortunate person. But how am I to know what misery I might cause by doing? No."

In spite of his fat and his age, Karmesin must have been as strong as an ox. He grunted, and tore the half-crown across, throwing the pieces out of the window.

"I heard a story," he said, "about a coin like that. Some men were playing cards. One of them lost everything, and borrowed a silver

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dollar for his fare home and his breakfast.

"On the way he was accosted by an unhappy girl in the last stages of despair. He was a good-hearted man; he gave her the silver dollar and told her to go in peace. Next morning she was found drowned, a bad dollar clutched in her hand. That bad dollar, you understand, had been the last straw.

"You see: the man of whom I told you; he was a good man, but Providence has used him for a tragic purpose."

Karmesin became silent. I said:

"Have you ever wanted to commit suicide?"

"No," said Karmesin. "Only murder."

"But I thought you disapproved of murder."

"I do, I do. Evil-doers should be left in the hands of their destiny, which always destroys them in the end. Nevertheless, I was responsible for the planning of the Perfect Murder."

"How?"

"Come with me," said Karmesin, jingling the remains of his pound. "I have been your guest many times. Now you must be mine."

He took me to Xavier's Bar and with an air of magnificence that sent the waiter skipping ordered brandy.

"What is money?" said Karmesin. "Dross, rubbish. Thank God I have always spent mine as it came!"

He lumbered over to the Numbers Machine in the corner, inserted a shilling, pulled the handle down. The numbered discs whirled round and round and thudded to stop—3, 3, 3. Ten shillings dropped out of the machine with a jingle.

"Observe," said Karmesin. "There is one thing in the world which no man can resist; the jingle of cash. See—every eye in the bar is upon us. Now, come and drink your brandy, and I will tell you about my murder.

My scheme was not unconnected with a fruit-machine in a club not unlike this, not many years ago (said Karmesin). The victim was a man called Skobelev, a man who richly deserved to die.

He was a criminal of the worst type, my friend; one who lives upon women. Skobelev's specialty was blackmail. He had a genius for working his way into the affections of highly respected women.

You know how it sometimes happens, with the wives of great men. Their husbands, preoccupied with affairs, neglect them. They yearn for attention. It is only natural.

Then comes an intrigue, possibly an innocent intrigue—a friendship, quite often with an unworthy man versed in the wiles of the woman-hunter.

Skobeleff was such a man. Women found it difficult to resist him, for he had a handsome face, a fine imperial Guardsman's figure, magnificent blue eyes, the flaxen hair of an angel, perfect self-confidence, a boundless experience with women, and a voice more melodious than harp-strings . . .

He struck up friendships with several nice ladies of uncertain age. This was his line; he would profess pure love and need for spiritual companionship; and then, by devious shifts, manage to get his victim to write a tender note—you know, my friend, "just to read when you are not here": it is an old trick.

And it always worked. It always has worked. I tell you, and always will: for women are fools in their affection, just like men.

Having his note, he would begin to bleed the victim. She was, you understand, always the wife of a very great man; somebody who could not afford a scandal of any kind, even if she were utterly innocent. He had a heart of ice, that Skobeleff, and bled them dry. It was a hideous business.

And when he wanted to have a quiet drink he always sat in the Maecenas Club near Piccadilly—an elegant drinking-den, with several fruit-machines in it, at which numerous idiots lost money enough to choke a hippopotamus.

Now it came to pass that I was approached one day by a woman for whom I entertained the deepest affection. She was the wife of a very famous French politician.

I liked her very much in a quite platonic and brotherly way. Yes, brotherly is the word for it, for she was twenty years younger than me, and I had bought her an ivory gum-ring with golden bells on it for her to cut her teeth on when she was a mere liver-coloured handful of babe in long clothes.

She approached me now and now told me a sad story. She was in terrible trouble. She had involved herself with Skobeleff, and had written him letters. Now, he demanded twenty thousand pounds sterling. Otherwise, he would place the letters in the hands of her husband's political opposition; ruin him, ruin her, ruin everything.

By selling some jewels she could raise ten thousand, but Skobeleff would not take ten thousand. He said: "Twenty or nothing. I can sell these letters for twenty thousand anyway . . ."

Could I help? Could I lend her ten thousand pounds?

I said that I could do better than that, and get the letters for her.

I did so. It is a story of common burglary. I went to Skobeleff's apartment heavily disguised, with a large revolver, made him open his safe, took the entire contents of it, together with the letters my friend had written, and having knocked Skobeleff unconscious with

the barrel of the gun, quietly made my departure. That was easy . . .

But when I came to examine the other papers I had taken, I was horrified. I, Karmesin, was disgusted! The man had made indexes and ledgers of dirty crime. He had a whole career of vile blackmail laid out.

God knows what a trail of misery he was planning to leave in his wake. I only knew one thing; by stealing his papers, I had held him up only for a little while. Sooner or later he was certain to operate again.

The law could not touch him. If he left the country, he would operate elsewhere. I decided to take the law into my own hands. I approached him with a proposition.

I told him who I was, and he was impressed; he knew of the things I had done. Then I said to him:

"Do you know who lives in the flat above the Maecenas Club?"

"Old Lord Westerby."

"Do you know what he keeps in his safe?" I asked.

"No, what?"

"The Westerby Collar."

"The Westerby Collar!" said Skobeleff. "A hundred and eighty priceless emeralds, and the Green Devil Emerald in the centre!"

"You could help me to get them. I have an immediate market. We can get at least two hundred thousand. Help me, and I'll split with you fifty-fifty."

"But how?"

"Now listen," I said, "I will do the work. I will get the emeralds. What I am going to suggest is this: I slip upstairs and get the jewels. A diversion is created that draws everybody in the club into the fruit-machine room.

"You slip out on to the balcony in the room behind. That balcony stands directly underneath the servant's bedroom in the Westerby flat. We synchronise our watches.

"At midnight precisely, you step on to the balcony and I drop the jewels down into your hands. Then you rejoin the crowd in the next room, and nobody will ever know that you have not been there all the time. Next morning you meet me and give me the jewels . . ."

Even as I spoke to him I could see the idea of a double-cross entering his treacherous mind. I could see it in his eyes.

"But how will you get everybody into the fruit-machine room?" he asked.

"At ten minutes to twelve," I said, "a man will win the jackpot on every machine in the place."

"If you can arrange that," he said, "you must be a wizard."

"I am a wizard," I said.

When I left him I looked up a man called Martin, a good little rogue who had had occasion to be thankful to me many a time, especially once when I supported his wife and three children while he spent a year in jail.

He was something of a genius of engineering; I mean, very clever with wheels and springs. Would he help me? He would have gone through hell and high water for me. I promised him fifty pounds.

His act was simple. At about eleven o'clock he had to come to the club with a bag, showing the official card of the firm that manufactured the fruit-machines. Then he was to unlock each machine, and adjust it so that the next revolution of the wheels would bring the total to Three Bars, which wins a jackpot.

That is a very simple matter for a man who knows how to handle his machinery. Normally, of course, your fruit-machine engineer sends the wheels flying round six or seven times before leaving the thing, just to see that all is well. But Martin would not do this, of course; and nobody would notice.

I told you: nothing attracts people like the jingle of money. There must have been a dozen machines in the club. The crash of a dozen jackpots would bring every member running from the next room; the floor would be knee-deep in silver. Everybody would be pulling handles, or stooping for fallen coins.

Then Skobelev would come out on the balcony. He thought he ran no risk, for the secretary and the commissioner whom one had to pass before entering or leaving the club could both swear that he had been in there all the time.

Only I was not going to be on the next floor with a priceless emerald collar. I was to be at the darkened window of the flat across the road. In my hands there was to be a rifle. I was a perfect shot, and still am.

From that distance I could not miss. I should put a bullet in the centre of Skobelev's forehead and wipe his evil presence from the face of the earth.

Martin was waiting in the street with a car. At ten seconds before twelve, as the theatre crowds filled the streets, he would jam the traffic; there would be a chaos of horns. He would make his engine backfire furiously. The sound of my shot would be unheard. It was perfect. And so it turned out.

A young fool called Poppins put a shilling in the fruit-machine and let out a deluge of coins. Others followed suit. The proprietor of the place came running, white in the face. The machines had gone mad! They were paying out jackpots!

The whole club poured into the room, eager to put a shilling in, or to see money coming out. Simultaneously, a fearful uproar broke out in the street below. Cars jammed in a black mass, honking like fury.

Martin's big black automobile banged and thundered, giving out clouds of smoke.

I got Skobelev's head in line, took a careful aim. He was outlined against the light. I could not miss—I who have knocked the head off a running antelope at five hundred yards. I pressed the trigger.

Skobelev shrugged his shoulders and walked back into the club. Remembering everything, planning everything, organizing everything so perfectly, I had forgotten to load my rifle.

Karmesin laughed. "Yet he deserved to die," he said.

"Well?" I asked. "Well? What?"

"Yes," said Karmesin. "It proves my point. Such men are always punished in the end. Nemesis is always upon them. They are never more than one jump ahead of a terrible vengeance. It is not for man to kill: only for God."

"But Skobelev?"

"Skobelev," said Karmesin. "He stayed in the club until one o'clock in the morning, then went home. Do you remember the big fire in the hosier's shop in Dublin Street, Piccadilly? Skobelev lived above. He perished there that night."

"You see, in leaving that blank spot of forgetfulness in my brain, Fate was preserving Skobelev for something terrible. A man cannot run away from his destiny."

"But how did you get into the flat exactly opposite the club, when you meant to kill Skobelev?"

"Ha!" said Karmesin. "I got into it the same way as I got into it before: with a duplicate key. And I knew that the occupant would be on the balcony opposite. *It was Skobelev's flat!*"

"And the fire?"

"Inscrutable Providence," said Karmesin. "When I found that I had forgotten my cartridges, I took my cigar out of my mouth and casually flipped it over my shoulder. 'Let Providence proceed with the matter,' I said."

"It was a ten-to-one chance against the cigar-end causing a fire. Well, it caused a fire, but not until Skobelev was asleep. Providence! Fate! Skobelev perished."

"It is right and proper that rubbish should be incinerated. So perish all rubbish. Another brandy?"

THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland. Honorable mentions go to Daniel Gould Levine of New York, New York; Ruby Uribe, Jr. of Valley Glen, California; David Owens of Alexandria, Virginia; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; B. Jackson of El Cajon, California; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida; Jim Sadlemyer of Indian Head, Saskatchewan, Canada; and Thomas P. Steiber of Cincinnati, Ohio.



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THE AGONY OF DE-FEET

CHARLES SCHAEFFER

Irma and Nick listened to Bennie's plan. "Okay, Irma, you're lookout again. Grab a seat on the low wall around the corner from the bank. Before it closes at five, get up, case the inside for any guard on duty."

Irma nodded. Bennie continued: "Me and Nick will hide around the corner outta sight, waiting in the Buick. You, Irma, sit down on the wall. We can't see the bank, so you're our eyes. One leg straight means a guard on duty. We scrub the joint. Two legs straight, no guard. We rumble.

"By the way, Irma, where'd you get them fancy high-heeled boots?" Bennie asked.

"Sale at Sole Sisters Shoes this morning. Fifty percent off all stock. Place was a madhouse."

Later, Bennie and Nick lurked out of view of the bank. "Lookee," Nick exclaimed. "Irma's two legs're straight. Let's go!"

Ski masks in place, Bennie and Nick hustled past the outstretched legs, headed for the bank, barreled through the door, and stopped, facing the guard's drawn gun. He ordered them out of the bank while he radioed the cops, who arrived and spotted Irma crouching nearby.

"You, too, sister," the sergeant said. "'Lookout Irma' they call her. Now we've nailed all three of them. Let's check out why that other dame's sitting on the wall."

The woman explained: "I bought these boots on sale at Sole Sisters. They pinch, so I sat down."

Bennie and Nick glowered at Irma.

"She beat me there," Irma whimpered, "by just two feet."

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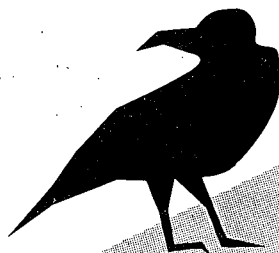
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